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MEMOIRS OF A SURVIVOR

by George Sten

In 1941 I lived with my family in the city of Lvov in eastern Poland. This was in an area of western Ukraine which the Soviet Union had annexed from Poland in September 1939. I was 17 years old. My family consisted of my mother, my step-father and my mother's mother - my grandmother, who was over 70, and ancient in my eyes.

Springtime came to Lvov. The snows melted, the trees and the flowers were blooming and there was a fragrance of lilac everywhere. I was very unhappy because my first love, a girl called Ada, had remained in her home town of Luck, a few hundred kilometres from Lvov, when I had left there to come to live in Lvov. I had not seen her for ages and I was missing her.

In Lvov we were fugitives from the West and, as such, should have been deported to Siberia. But, thanks to a bribe of 300 rubles, we had not been deported and stayed in Lvov. With the benefit of hindsight, I think, we would all have been better off in Siberia than under the subsequent German occupation.

The news filtering through from the West was not encouraging. The Germans were pressing on with the persecution of Jews. Ghettos had been formed and we heard of concentration camps, although at this stage we did not know about the final solution. We were full of hope that somehow we would survive the war under the Soviets, unlike the Germans, who did not engage in all out persecution of the Jews.

I was to sit for my higher school certificate in June and I also got a call-up notice to join the Red Army in July '41. I passed my higher school exam satisfactorily and started trying to organise a way to get out of being drafted into the Red Army.

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Then all hell broke loose. At the end of June the Germans attacked the Soviets and within a few days they were in Lvov. In the streets the loud speakers were boasting that the Red Army troops were advancing to Berlin, but in reality the units of the Red Army were retreating in complete disarray. Ukrainian snipers were shooting from the roofs of houses, killing Russians and civilians, whoever they got in sight. In some streets, Red Army units fought the Ukrainian snipers, although without much success. The Russians were retreating towards the east in panic, despite their boasts in the press and on the radio that they were winning the war against the Germans.

After a few years of friendship the Russian propaganda machine had turned against the Germans. They were calling them reactionary fascists, despicable criminals and murderers. We didn't have many air raids by the German bombers, they probably wanted to save their bombs for the front line. Then a terrible smell started to pervade the air. It was everywhere, the foul smell of burning flesh and human bodies. It turned out that the retreating Russian prison guards had started to execute their prisoners. They could not finish the job, so they had set fire to the gaols, burning the prisoners alive. Apparently this happened not only in Lvov but in other towns as well. It was a Russian policy not to leave behind any live enemies.

Slowly we ran out of foodstuffs, we didn't have any bread or cigarettes and everything became scarce. The shops were closed, interstate telephone connections were cut off - thank goodness we still had water and electricity.

When we heard the sound of big guns from the west we knew that the Germans were approaching. Finally they entered the city - the first outfits on motor bikes, then the tanks, then the

infantry. They were greeted by jubilant Ukrainians waving yellow and blue flags and flowers. They were shooting any Soviet soldiers who had not managed to escape and had been caught by militant Ukrainians who were all armed with carbines and had formed a sort of Ukrainian militia.

One of the first things the Germans did, after the occupation, was execute a number of Polish university professors and their families. Among them one ex-Prime Minister of Poland. The Germans had a list with their addresses and names, either from their informers or from the Ukrainians. This was part of the German drive against the Polish intelligentsia: they wanted to turn the Poles into a slave nation without any intellectuals. The professors were dragged out of their houses and shot in the street, without any sort of trial. What struck me about the German infantry was that they looked much better equipped, clothed, and probably fed than the Red Army soldiers. The Red Army soldiers looked like beggars compared to the Germans.

And so life under the Germans commenced, with the Ukrainians rampaging through the city. There was looting and arson and much settling of old accounts between Ukrainians, Poles and Jews. The Jews were beaten mercilessly, and were being executed by the hundreds. The Germans did not seem to take a great part in this; they let their Ukrainian proxies do it for them.

We did not hear any more big guns. Apparently the front was moving eastwards. The invincible Red Army was still fleeing, and the Germans were advancing rapidly towards the east. The streets were nearly empty, apart from the Ukrainians ransacking the shops and houses. All of a sudden they were carrying arms and wore arm bands with their national colours, and badges with the sign of the trident. We didn't venture into the streets very much

because of our fear of being beaten up, or arrested by the Ukrainian militia or the Germans. We were running short of money and short of food.

My Polish schoolmates came to our place one morning and took me for a walk - they said they wanted to see how the Germans behaved. I was not too keen to go, but I thought that in their company I would be safe. So I went into the street. We were walking along one of the main streets when all of a sudden we heard screams, and saw a group of about three or four hundred Jews being led down the middle of the street by Ukrainian militiamen. The militiamen and people from the pavements were beating the Jews with rocks, wooden sticks and fists. There was blood everywhere. The Jews were apparently being led to the gaol, or to a camp established by the Germans. Later on we heard that they had been executed. It was horrible. Daute's Inferno was a kindergarten compared to it. I will never forget the screaming or the Ukrainian mob who were behaving worse than animals. How can human beings be so inhuman to each other? I will never understand this. The mob did not need any encouragement. They were relishing what they were doing. I did not see one German there - it was all the work of Ukrainian nationalists. There was blood everywhere. I saw Jews with broken limbs and split skulls, covered with blood. I must say that I did not see one dead body - they finished them off at the gaol. After a few minutes of watching this horrible spectacle my mates said that we had better go. As we went back towards my home I was very scared, and I really didn't know what to say or what to do. I thought that, if this went on, my life would be finished in a few days.

At home things were even worse. While I was away the janitor had told some Ukrainians that we were Jews. Two Ukrainian militiamen had gone upstairs to the first floor where we lived,

and taken away my step-father. They let my mother and my grandmother stay. For the time being they didn't want any women, only men. My step-father was taken, and we never saw him again. Later on we heard that over the next two or three days, the Ukrainians and the Germans executed a few thousand Jews, without any trial and without any possibility of defence. We could not do anything. There was nobody to appeal to.

My mother cried and I reflected that all her life she had known unhappiness. My father had died when my mother was twenty six and I was three years old. I don't remember him. My mother had been a young widow when she married my step-father, and now he was gone. She was a widow again. I really did not know what to do. After talking it over, my mother and I decided that I should go and see my mother's brother, who lived in another part of Lvov with his wife and two daughters. Before the War, he had been a well-known physician in Warsaw. Now he held a high position in the hospital and we thought that he should take my grandmother into his care. He flatly refused, and his wife got hysterical when I told her of our plans.

Luckily, when the Russians had issued passports to us the previous year they had put into my passport that my nationality was Polish. So, whenever a militiaman asked for my papers, I showed him my passport which stated that I was Polish and not a Jew. This saved my life. I do not know how this had originally happened. All I remember is that when the clerk in the Russian passport office asked me my religion, I said Jewish; and when he asked my nationality, I said Polish. The Soviet passport did not show a person's religion - it only showed the name, address, colour of eyes, colour of hair and nationality.

I started to look around for somebody to help me organise a truck to take us to Tomaszow Mazowiecki, our hometown before the War,

which was in the west of Poland, about one hundred and twenty kilometres from Warsaw and about fifty kilometres from Lodz. We lived there until the outbreak of the War in September 1939, when we decided to flee to the east to avoid the Germans. We finally landed in the Russian occupied east of Poland in a city called Luck where we stayed until the summer of 1940 when we moved to Lvov. My mother and I now decided to go back to our hometown in the west of Poland.

It would have been impossible to go by train with my grandmother, who was physically very weak and could not really walk. Anyway, we would have been detected as Jews, and shot immediately. Through my schoolmates I got in touch with a Polish petty criminal who had bribed two Germans who owned a truck, to take a number of Jews to Warsaw. If I remember correctly, the Pole and the Germans wanted 5,000 roubles or marks - I do not remember which currency was then in force. My task was to get a number of Jews willing to take the risk, who would pay to go in this truck to Warsaw. I ran around the city to all the addresses known to me. Thanks to my Polish passport, I could move freely without being beaten, arrested or shot.

Finally, after a few days I had about sixteen or seventeen people wanting to go with us to Warsaw. We paid the money in advance; we had to, there was no other way. But somehow the Germans were honest, and they took us to our destination. When we boarded the truck, it was 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning. The ride to Warsaw was a nightmare. My grandmother sat in a chair specially brought for her, and had to use the chamber pot, as she could not walk. Occasionally the truck stopped and we could jump out and relieve ourselves. We did not have much food in the truck, and it was bitterly cold - it was already the beginning of October. Our German drivers were in no hurry, and it took us two days and one night to get to Warsaw. We were lucky that there were no control points on the way; nobody asked us for our documents or even looked into the back of the truck. The German police just talked to the German drivers, so perhaps the drivers bribed them.

The German drivers had promised to drop us off somewhere close to Tomaszow. We did not want to go to Warsaw with the rest of the Jewish passengers. As promised, they left us in a small town close to Tomaszow where we boarded the train to take us there. Again, I was scared stiff that we would be noticed as Jews, but somehow we were lucky. I bought three tickets and paid for them with German marks and we were in Tomaszow in about two hours. The railway station in Tomaszow was about three kilometres from the shopping centre. I had to get a horse-drawn carriage to take us to the shopping centre. Finally, exhausted, dirty, hungry and cold, we arrived at Tomaszow. There was already a ghetto in Tomaszow, and that is where we went. The people in the ghetto thought we were ghosts. We looked so terrible. My father's brother didn't recognise me. Our flat had been taken by refugees from another city, so we had to live with my father's two brothers and their wives (luckily they had no children), and with my paternal grandmother. In the ghetto, under the Germans, it was a completely new way of life when compared with life under the Russians in Lvov, which now seemed not to have been as bad as we had thought when we were there. After the journey from Lvov, I slept for probably two days without a break.

Life in the ghetto was a nightmare. By then, there was a death penalty for leaving the ghetto without proper permission from the Germans. Every few weeks there were contributions demanded by the Germans - we had to pay them money, or surrender all jewellery, furs and so on. Food was scarce, typhoid was rampant. We were eating horse meat and beetroot marmalade and horrible black bread made of flour mixed up with sand. Little boys were trying to smuggle potatoes and other foodstuffs into the ghetto, and the Germans were shooting them like wild beasts. It was a hunt; but instead of hunting deer they were hunting little Jewish boys. There were always dead bodies around the entries to the ghetto. We lived in constant fear of being arrested and executed or taken to a concentration camp. We did not know then that most of the camps were death camps.

At the beginning I didn't work. There was no work for Jews, except for carting the dead bodies to the cemetery for free. It turned out that my father's older brother had made some money when the Germans had first occupied Tomaszow. The Germans had imposed trustees on all factories, but let the factories work and trade. Many Germans were corrupt, and my father's brother and most other Jewish manufacturers made money with them at the beginning. Later on, the Germans kicked out the Jewish manufacturers, expropriated their factories and established German trusteeships, to run all of the factories for the benefit of the Germans. My mother talked with my father's older brother, and he started to give us money - I do not remember how much - to keep us alive. Of course, it was not very much, and we were always on the brink of starvation.

The ghetto in Tomaszow consisted of only a few streets. There was a wall dividing the Aryan side and the ghetto which ran from the ghetto towards the shopping centre. At the back of the ghetto there were no walls or fences, and there the streets ran into corn and wheat fields, and the houses of peasants who lived on the outskirts of the town.

The Germans appointed Jewish policemen. Some of them were alright, but some of them were corrupt and sadistic. They wanted to prove themselves to the Germans, and they used to beat the poor Jewish offenders for nothing. Of course, belonging to the Jewish Police was some sort of a guarantee that the Germans would keep you alive. However, ultimately it did not help. All of these policemen were killed in due course by the Germans, except for the ones who somehow escaped. I did not belong to the Police or to the Jewish Council, because I was too young.

Some of the members of the Jewish Council were also corrupt; they made secret deals with the Germans, traded in currencies and so on. They thought that they would save their own skins, and the skins of their families. But, again, this proved not to be the case. Most of them finished up in the same gas chambers as other Jews who were not members of the Jewish Council. Some of them, of course, survived. Neither money nor connections were a guarantee against death in the ghetto - only good luck. Of course it was easier to survive with money than without money, but I have seen rich people being executed by the Germans or their proxies, without much fuss, and I have seen poor people without any money who managed to survive. I had no money, only my non-Semitic looks, and a lot of luck.

I found some of my mates with whom I went to school before the War. Some of them were already dead. I managed to avoid the compulsory work imposed by the Germans, and most of the days I used to play bridge with my schoolmates. I was never a good player, but we used to play for six or seven hours a day, for weeks on end. Since that time I have never liked playing bridge.

Then, in about March 1942, when the weather got warmer, I started to work for a commission attached to the Jewish hospital in the ghetto. My function and the function of other members of this commission was to inspect houses and to notify the hospital of any cases of typhoid. People with typhoid had to be isolated in the hospital to prevent the spread of disease. Of course, sick people didn't want to go to the hospital. The hospital had no resources or medicine, and people were dying there like flies. I don't know how many hundreds of people died of typhoid. Germans were scared of typhoid - they would not venture to walk into a flat or house where there was a sign outside saying that the place was contaminated by typhoid. In the mornings you could

always see the dead bodies of people who had died of hunger or cold, or of some disease. Everywhere, there were beggars in rags, begging for scraps of food or for money.

There were constant German patrols in the streets of the ghetto, and anybody considered to be an offender under German law was shot. There was not even a semblance of law and order. The whim of the German gendarmes was the ultimate law. They specialised in shooting young boys who were smuggling in food from the Aryan side. They were corrupt; they took bribes willingly, but very often they would take a bribe, then go on shooting.

The sadistic cruelty of the Germans was beyond imagination; with great relish they took photographs of executions, and killed unarmed men, women, and children. There were plenty of Germans in Tomaszow before the War - the so called Volksdeutsch. When the Germans took over, nearly all these Volksdeutsch claimed German nationality and allegiance to Hitler. They were worse than the Germans from Germany, because they knew the local conditions and all of the local people and it was a great opportunity for them to settle private accounts and to destroy whoever they wanted to destroy. Of course, not all Germans were sadists, but there were many of them who enjoyed the dirty job of killing and plundering.

I soon tired of the work in the sanitary commission, and was lucky to get a job outside the ghetto. One day I met a Polish builder in the ghetto who, before the war, had worked for my grandfather in his factory. He remembered my grandfather very well, and was fond of him. He offered me a job outside the ghetto as his helper. For him it was a good deal because he paid me, a Jew, less than a Pole. He was doing a building job for the only brewery in Tomaszow. The brewery belonged to a German family. He got me a pass from the German authorities for going

outside the ghetto, and his son used to come to the ghetto to take me to the place of work, and then march me back after work.

It was hard manual labour but I was quite happy with it. At least for a few hours I was outside the ghetto and its poisonous atmosphere. The Polish workers at the brewery were indifferent to me, and my bosses were friendly. Once, the mother of the owner of the brewery came to the building site and started to talk to me. She said that she had known my father well and that he was better looking than me. After work, when I went back home and told my grandmother about it, she said, 'Yes, of course, your father had a love affair with her before he married your mother.'

This German family was rather friendly. Later, when I escaped from the ghetto and went by train to Warsaw, I met the owner of the brewery who knew me quite well at the railway station. When he saw me he turned his head away and did not do anything. He could have called the German police and had me arrested. However, he was a decent, honest German.

Work at the brewery had other advantages; I was outside the ghetto and people could come to visit me and to talk to me. When the builder finished his job the brewery engaged me to wash the bottles before they were filled with beer. There was a special machine for this, using hot water and moving brushes. From time to time the bottles used to crack, and I always had scratches on my hands and fingers. I could drink as much beer as I wanted, but could not take any beer outside the brewery.

One day, during lunchtime, my German governess came to visit me. She brought me a good dinner and professed her love and affection for me. She had been with me from the time I was three until I was seven. When I was a child my German was better than my Polish, thanks to her. She taught me proper table manners and proper behaviour. When I was seven my mother decided that she

was no longer needed and dismissed her. She still lived in Tomaszow and married a Russian man. When the Germans occupied Tomaszow she declared herself as being German. I heard rumours that she was a bitch, that she had dobbed in her husband to the Gestapo for something or other and that the Gestapo had arrested him and sent him to a camp in Germany from which he never returned. Apart from the dinner my ex-Governess did not offer any assistance and I never saw her again.

Another time, one of my Polish colleagues from the high school, came to visit me. He wanted to take me to the beach for a swim. I refused and told him that that was a stupid idea because, just for a swim we could both be killed by the Germans; me for being Jewish and outside the ghetto without permission, and him for fraternising with a Jew. I tried to find out from him if there were any Polish resistance groups or units in Tomaszow. He told me that he didn't know.

Maybe that was true, or maybe he didn't want to tell me the truth. He said that if I was thinking about joining the Polish resistance then I should forget about it. He said most of the members of these resistance groups belonged to the Home Army. Most of them were anti-Semites who would not like to have Jews in their ranks. In addition to this they justly thought the Jews were more vulnerable and likely to be arrested by the Germans. After being arrested, they believed, it was only a matter of a beating and the Jew would tell the Germans anything he knew. He said if I wanted to fight the Germans I would have to find a resistance group outside the Home Army, if such a group existed. That was a bitter disappointment to me. I was obsessed by the idea of fighting the Germans, to take revenge for all the misery they had brought to us, and for the death of my step-father and all the others I knew.

One night, there was a big scare in the ghetto. We heard pistol shots and rifle shots in the street. The Gestapo and the German police were going from house to house, fetching prominent members of the Jewish Council - Jewish lawyers and doctors, former rich factory owners and so on. They were all shot, with the rest of their families, on the spot in the backyard of their own houses. The Germans left the bodies for the Jewish caretakers to remove. A number of my class mates from high school were killed this way. The display of bloody bodies on the pavement in front of the houses, or in the backyards, was probably intentional, as the Germans tried to intimidate us as much as possible. News about the death camps and gas chambers started to infiltrate but people refused to believe it. They used to say that the Germans were too cultured to do that; the nation of Goethe and Beethoven could not commit those horrible crimes. That was, of course, nonsense. I started to believe that if we did not escape from the ghetto we would be finished sooner or later, and more likely sooner.

A messenger from Warsaw came to see me at the brewery. He was a Polish chap who was sent to me by my mother's sister, Wanda. He brought the message that we should try to escape from the ghetto to Wanda's place, in a small town near Warsaw, where she was somehow well situated and protected against the Germans. Family consultations and discussions began. My uncle said that I was crazy to think about escaping from the ghetto. He said that the Germans would catch up with me, and would shoot me or send me to a concentration camp. He said that in the ghetto we would survive somehow. The Germans could not kill all the Jews. With the benefit of hindsight, how wrong he was, but that was the way of thinking of ninety five percent of Jews. It is very hard to describe the full horror of our lives. The constant fear of being killed or sent to a camp, or just being beaten by the

Germans or their proxies, Jewish policemen, and later on the Ukrainians and Latvians. The feeling of being trapped was overwhelming.

In the ghetto there was a very limited semblance of normal life. There were families with small children, but there were few pregnancies. There were no schools for Jews, only underground private classes. There were no night clubs or restaurants, no theatres or cinemas. There was always a curfew - if I remember correctly - from eight o'clock in the evening until six o'clock in the morning. Anybody in the street got shot on the spot if spotted by the Germans. Widows and widowers whose spouses had been executed or sent to camps, were quick to establish new de facto relationships.

I was working on plans to escape from the ghetto. My main obstacle was my mother and my grandmother. My grandmother was not in a position to walk. It was very hard to move her from one chair to another. I did not know what to do. I did not want to leave her without at least trying to get her out. Aunt Wanda from Warsaw sent the same messenger again with false documents for all of us, and with a small amount of money to help us to organise our escape. The false documents were deficient and any German or Polish policeman could have realised this within minutes. But we didn't know this at the time.

My mother and grandmother decided to try to go with me. I got in touch with the Polish woman who had been my wet nurse, who lived in the former summer house of my grandmother on the outskirts of Tomaszow. She said that she would organise a carriage to take my mother and grandmother to the railway station, and that she would go with them in this carriage. I should follow the next day on my own. This woman was very courageous. There was by then a

death penalty for helping Jews, and she knew of it. Plenty of people knew my mother and my grandmother from before the War and we could easily have been recognised. We decided to take the train at nightfall.

We heard new rumours that in a few days the ghetto was to be liquidated and that Ukrainians and Latvians were already on the way to Tomaszow to surround the ghetto so that nobody would be able to escape. There was tension and fear and a feeling of imminent catastrophe. We sold what we could of our belongings and packed the remainder into two small suitcases. With the remnants of the money I bought a pair of horse-riding boots and a winter overcoat with a fur collar. At one stage Jews had had to surrender all furs to the Germans, so a fur collar was a sort of symbol of not being Jewish, and it was the same for riding boots.

So, one night, at the end of October 1942, I went with my grandmother and my mother to the place appointed to meet my wet nurse. She was waiting there for us, and the carriage was not far away. Alas, we did not succeed. My grandmother was unable to walk, and we had to push her from both sides. At one stage a Polish policeman turned up, but we paid him some money and he went away without creating any problems. The driver of the carriage said he would not wait any longer and finally my grandmother said that she was not able to cope with it, and that she would go back to the ghetto and await her fate. I pushed my mother into the carriage and she went on to the railway station with my wet nurse, while I went back to the ghetto with my grandmother. This farewell was very painful, but what could I do? I had to leave the next day to avoid my own death. If I had stayed with my grandmother I would not have been able to help her in any way, and I would have been sent to the death camp.

Even though I was working in the brewery, this was not like work for the German army which did save some Jews for a few weeks - I would have been taken like all the others.

We went back to our room and I talked to the neighbours. They promised that they would take care of my grandmother, whatever that meant. I left her some money, and the next day I said goodbye and left. I did not know what to say and she did not say anything; she did not ask me to stay with her, she knew what was going on. I had nightmares about this for a long time.

The next day I left Tomaszow, went on foot to the railway station, bought a ticket and went to Warsaw. I arrived in Warsaw in the morning, took a rickshaw, and went immediately to the address in Bracka Street that I had been given in Warsaw. A great friend and saviour of a large number of Jews lived there with his wife. He saved hundreds of Jews, not for money but simply for humanitarian reasons. He was my protector for all the time I was on the Aryan side.

He looked at my Aryan papers and said that they were terrible fakes but that he would organise something better for me in a few days. In the meantime I would have to sit at my aunt's place and wait. They gave me breakfast and despatched me to the place where aunt Wanda lived - about one hour by train from Warsaw.

That was the beginning of my life on the Aryan side using a false identity and, again, I lived in constant fear of being denounced as a Jew.

I was now grounded for a few days while I waited for a new set of proper documents to be provided by my protector. I had time to think about the past and about life in the ghetto. During the

two years I spent in school under the Bolshevik's rule, they crammed my mind with Bolshevik propaganda, the rudimentary principles of Marxism and Leninism, and the glory of the great proletarian leader, Stalin. Being a sceptic, I had not believed one word of it, and after this propaganda barrage I became more anti-Communist than before. The only positive side to this Soviet education was that I had gained some knowledge of the Russian and Ukrainian languages, and of the history of Russia.

Under the German propaganda we Jews were told incessantly that we were sub-human, vermin to be exterminated and that the Germans were supermen. I think the worst effect of being in the ghetto was the soul-destroying feeling that you were trapped, and that you were doomed to die in the gas chambers or in some other way. There was no way out of it. The feeling of gloom and doom was permanent, as was the constant fear of being beaten up, of being shot, or of being arrested and sent to a camp. It is very hard to describe. It is not easy to understand.

I remember quite clearly that night when the Germans were executed the Jewish so-called intelligentsia in the ghetto - the lawyers, the doctors, the members of the Jewish Council, the prominent businessmen and so on. My uncle Fred was one of the members of the Jewish Council. Of course he was scared that they would get on to him as well. We gathered in the cellar of the house and waited. Outside we could hear the Germans' footsteps and their shouting because they had the habit of dragging the victims into the street and shooting them on the pavement in front of the house. That was dreadful! We heard the footsteps coming to our house, and of course we did not know whether they would come to fetch us or not. We did not know whether we were on the German list of victims. The sound of footsteps faded as

they passed by our house. We let out a sigh of relief! A few minutes later a new wave of loud footsteps and another party of the Germans by-passed our house.

Some people, the religious ones, prayed to God. I must say that I was never a believer. I came from an assimilated family and I did not have much to do with religion. My paternal grandfather was a religious man and he insisted that I had my bar mitzvah. I did have my bar mitzvah, but after my grandfather died my contact with the Jewish religion ceased almost completely. At the age of fifteen I got hold of a book by the German philosopher, Ernest Häckel, in a Polish translation. It was called 'The Outline of the Monistic Philosophy'. Written some time in the middle of the 19th Century it was inspired by the optimistic belief that the human intellect would conquer everything and solve all riddles. It was an eye opener for me and became the basis of my atheism. By now Häckel is probably completely forgotten. He is not even listed in my dictionary of philosophy published in 1989.

Up until, I think, the autumn of 1942, the Jews in the ghettos did not believe in the Final Solution. When the Ukrainians and the Latvians surrounded the ghetto in Tomaszow - after I had escaped and before the liquidation - that was the end of it. I was later told that somebody saw my grandmother being led to the train by an elderly neighbour. What happened to her afterwards I do not know. She either died in the gas chambers or suffocated on the train. It is very sad and painful to think and to talk about it, but I do not have a guilty conscience. I could have done nothing more. If I had stayed with her I would have been killed like all the rest. Out of, I think, something between fifteen and twenty thousand, only a few hundred Jews were left after the liquidation of the ghetto in October 1942.

I searched the ghetto for some resistance organisations, but they did not exist, as far as I know. Radios were not permitted by the Germans and I do not think that there was an illegal radio hidden anywhere in the ghetto. All the news we had was from Polish language propaganda papers published in Warsaw on the Aryan side. Probably some Poles had hidden radios, but the only news from the outside world was from the pro-German newspapers, and from clandestine gossip claiming that the Russians were slowly starting to beat the Germans. Anyway, the Russians halted the German advance to the east - Leningrad and Moscow remained in Russian hands. This gave us a small ray of hope that at some time the Germans would finally be defeated.

The arrangements at my aunt Wanda's house where my mother and I stayed at that time, were rather unusual. Aunt Wanda and her husband and daughter had moved from Lodz after the War began, when Lodz became a part of the great German Reich. They now occupied a rented cottage in Milanowek, a small town about one hour's ride by train from Warsaw. Before the War it had been populated mainly by rich people from Warsaw who had their villas there, and used to commute to Warsaw every day. During the War there were many fugitives from all parts of Poland living there, because of its proximity to Warsaw. I became aware that there was a great number of Jews hiding in Milanowek under false identities. Their numbers increased after the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto.

Aunt Wanda had two rich Jewish women as boarders. They were in hiding, of course, with false papers. They had very Semitic looks and could not go out into the street. It was very courageous for my aunt to take in these women, because my aunt and her family were Jewish and it was really audacious for Jews

to hide other Jews. These two women were very rich. They had American dollars and pre-Soviet Russian gold roubles and could afford to pay for everything. When I asked them how it was for them during the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, when there was no bread available, they told me that they ate cakes - an answer the French queen, Marie Antoinette, would have been proud of. These two women were somehow smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto, and came to live in Milanowek with my aunt. So, at one stage, with me and my mother, there were seven Jews hiding in the one house. I thought that the sooner I got out the better.

Finally my protector rang up from Warsaw and said that he had good, reliable documents for me and for my mother. I was now about to start a new chapter in my life - as a Roman Catholic Pole.

My father's family in the Tomaszow ghetto did not survive. Only the wife of my father's younger brother survived by staying on the Aryan side. I met her in Warsaw on a few occasions. She had a number of Polish friends who had helped her, and she had so-called good non-Semitic looks. She died after the War. So, except for me and this aunt, the whole of my father's family was exterminated in 1942.

The trip to Warsaw was uneventful. I went on my own as my mother was to follow me in a couple of days. First, I went to the flat occupied by my protector. He gave me a set of documents - authentic documents which had belonged to somebody who had died young. I was suddenly two years older according to these documents, and I was born in a small town in the centre of Poland. I had to memorise my new name, date of birth and

all the details. My protector gave me a number of commandments to follow for living with a false identity:

1. Do not disclose your address and phone number or the address of your work place.
2. Avoid walking in the street with Jewish friends who are also pretending to be Aryans.
3. Rent a room for yourself and do not live with your mother. Your mother will not be your mother according to the papers.
4. Live like a monk. Forget about sex. You are circumcised and having sex with anybody could lead to disaster if your female partner recognises this.
5. Learn some common prayers and learn how to behave in the church and go to church on Sundays.
6. In case of blackmail or arrest, stick to your guns and to your false identity. Never admit that you are Jewish.

My protector told me that he would arrange a job for me with a German firm within a few days. I was to go back to Milanowek and rent a room somewhere and disassociate myself from my family.

I went back by train to Milanowek. The countryside between Warsaw and Milanowek was beautiful. It was covered by pine woods and little villas which were mostly owned by rich people. There were no factories or industrial conglomerates; not even blocks of flats. The few stations between Warsaw and Milanowek all looked

like the outer suburbs of Warsaw with weekenders and villas. From the window of the train I could see the red roofs of the villas between green pine trees. It was very peaceful and serene; there were no signs of war at all. Just the opposite to the ghetto.

By then it was November, and the passengers in the train were talking about hunting, and shopping in Warsaw, and the hard times under the Germans. After living in the ghetto it was some sort of return to normal life for me - except that it was really not normal because I was pretending to be somebody else.

My protector arranged for me to get a job in a German firm repairing pneumatic brakes on the big lorries used by the German army. The firm was owned by two Germans - real Germans, not Volksdeutsch. We were about thirty or forty workers. Some of us were real workers, but the majority were students or others who had never done manual work in their lives. I found out only after the War that I was not the only Jew employed by this firm. There were another two or three. The German owners either did not know about it or knew about it and acquiesced, probably thinking that this would be a good insurance for them in case the Germans lost the War.

My job was to refit old compressors. It was manual work; not very hard, but rather boring. As I am, and was, clumsy I do not think the compressors refitted by me lasted very long. Anyway, it was a job. The work shop was in the centre of Warsaw, and work started at 7am. I had to catch a train from where I lived at about 5.30am to be in Warsaw on time.

I had no trouble finding a room to rent. Everybody was looking for additional money, and rooms with the use of a bathroom (if there was one) were easy to get. My landlady did not know my real identity, of course. I paid her the rent for a few weeks in advance and considered moving to Warsaw. To move to Warsaw one had to get a permit from the German authorities. As I was, according to my papers, born in a provincial town far from Warsaw, I had to get such a permit or arrange for a false one. My protector advised me to go to the German Police Headquarters and lodge a form. I had to get a certificate from my employers that they needed me in Warsaw. In retrospect I think it was foolish of me to go to the German Police Headquarters and ask for permission to live in Warsaw. However, I succeeded and I got the permit after only a few days.

In Warsaw I rented a room in the old town area. It was quite a large room and there was a bathroom which I shared with the landlady who was an old widow. She was very nice and friendly. Mind you, bathrooms were not so universal in Warsaw as they are now in Australia. My wages were sufficient for me to pay rent and to buy cheap food. I did not have any facilities for cooking and, anyway, I did not know how to cook. I survived mainly on bread, margarine, beetroot marmalade and very cheap fish pastes. The fish paste I was living on had one disadvantage. It smelt terrible and it would rot very quickly. I could not afford to buy such luxuries as ham or butter or cakes which were readily available on the market at high prices. When the War started I didn't even know how to make tea! Our servants had always done these things and now I had to fend for myself. Every second or third day I would eat a cheap meal in a cheap restaurant. This was always risky because I had to mingle with the public, and there were hundreds of blackmailers and police informers in Warsaw.

At that time in Warsaw there was a large network of underground people and activities - illegal in the eyes of the Germans but somehow half-heartedly tolerated by them, thanks to corruption and bribery. There were Jews in hiding, resistance members in hiding, prison escapees in hiding, manufacturers of moonshine vodka in hiding, and so on. The drinking of vodka became a national disaster. I think the Germans were promoting it on purpose to degrade the population. Almost everything was rationed and the shelves in the shops were practically empty, but vodka was on sale everywhere. I remember getting a bottle of vodka a month on a coupon.

My daily routine was very monotonous. I got up in the morning, went by tram to work and returned home again by tram at about 5pm. I avoided going out after working hours. There were many informers and blackmailers in the streets and stories were rampant about people going out and never coming back.

In Warsaw there was a whole industry connected with Jews - for fabricating documents, providing hiding places, providing travelling facilities and so on, and there were, of course, all sorts of criminals and petty criminals who made their living out of Jewish misery. Arrests and executions were an everyday event. There were often raids in the street when people were taken hostage and transported to concentration camps and to death camps. The gaols were full and I was just extremely lucky to survive all this without one blackmail attempt. I was just lucky!

I had a number of friends in Warsaw - some Poles but most of them Jews in hiding - but all of these contacts were very risky and I tried to lead a solitary life. In my rented room, I either slept or read old books. As well, the work at the workshop was very

boring. Gradually, I got used to my new identity and to my role of being a Roman Catholic Pole. On a number of occasions I went to church on a Sunday to learn how to behave there. It was not very difficult to follow what the other people were doing. I also learnt some prayers in case I was caught.

I saw my mother from time to time and we pretended that she was my auntie. I had an argument with my mother because of my circumcision. 'Because of your placidity I now carry a death warrant in my pants', I told her. 'All my cousins - the sons of your sisters - are not circumcised and I was the only one. Why did you agree to do this to me?' She said, 'Your father's family insisted on it, and, anyway, back in 1933 nobody anticipated Hitler and all this.' I was angry with her unjustly, especially because one of my cousins, who was not circumcised, was in Siberia felling trees for the Bolsheviks and I, with my death warrant in my pants, had to be in Warsaw under the Germans.

It is not entirely true that I was never blackmailed. Once I received an invitation from a friend of my mother, who was a distant relation. She and her husband lived with her sister and her husband in a flat not far from my place. The sister's husband was not Jewish. I was there after curfew so I decided to stay the night. There were five of us there - four Jews and one Pole. In the middle of the night there was a loud knock on the door and a lot of commotion on the stairs. When we opened the door three Germans in uniform burst in with pistols at the ready. They were, I think from the German Criminal Police called by Germans Kripo - Kriminal Polizei. They put the men against the wall and started to search our clothing. They searched the women in another room. Then they went through the furniture and belongings. They found some American paper dollars which made them happy. They must have been informed by somebody that Jews

lived there, because they examined the penises of all of the men. Two of us were circumcised and one was not, and I thought they would take us to the Gestapo. After a lot of shouting and screaming and pistol whipping they took all of the money and whatever else they could carry that was of value, and left us there. I promised myself that I would never go to another gathering of Jews.

While my double life continued, the tide of the War was turning against the Germans. They were beaten soundly at Stalingrad and were stopped elsewhere in Russia; they started to fall back. The light at the end of the tunnel was visible. I made a vow that I would survive all this to fight the Germans and avenge the death of my step-father, my grandmother, my father's family and all the others.

The place in Milanowek where my mother lived was raided by the Germans while my mother was in Warsaw, and it would have been risky for her to go back there. So we decided that she would take over my room and I would look for another room elsewhere. I found a room from an advertisement in the paper, close to the Warsaw Polytechnic. There was no bathroom and I had to do all my washing in the basin in my room. I could not have a proper bath and I didn't want to go to a public bath. My new landlady was, again, a widow. She had a grown up son who was a chronic alcoholic and a daughter who was a salesgirl in a shop. I used to give my monthly ration of vodka to the son for free, and he became a great friend of mine.

In April 1943 the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto occurred. This was, as far as I know, the first attempt to resist the Germans with arms. The fighters were heroes. They knew that they could not win but they preferred to die standing than to live kneeling.

I first heard the sound of guns and saw black smoke billowing over the houses. There were stories going around of people trying to escape through underground sewers, and Germans waiting for them with machine guns. However the Jewish fighters managed to kill a number of Germans and destroy some of their tanks.

I had conscience problems, and I was thinking at one stage of going through the wall and joining the resistance fighters. My protector stopped me. 'Don't be silly', he said. 'If you go there you will get killed sooner or later. One Jewish fighter will not help them. They are doomed to lose. I sympathise with them, and all decent Poles sympathise with them, but apart from supplying them with medicines and weapons and ammunition we cannot help very much.'

The reaction in the streets was mixed. On the trams I heard comments like, 'Jewish cutlets are burning. The Germans are doing the dirty work for us. After the War Poland will have no Jews.' But I also heard comments like, 'What the Germans are doing to them is inhuman.' In the end I decided not to go there, and I tried to contact the Polish resistance, but to no avail. The ghetto uprising was finally suppressed and it seemed that Hitler's Final Solution would be completed very soon.

My protector told me that there were now surgeons who could operate on circumcised penises. The operation was meant to make the penis look uncircumcised. He asked me whether I wanted this done, but warned me that it was very expensive and very painful and not always successful. I decided against it, mainly because I didn't have the money to pay for it. I understood that the standards of our civilisation must have been very very low if the shape of a man's penis decided whether he was going to live or to die.

My old nurse from Tomaszow sent me a most disturbing message telling me that my two grandmothers, my father's two brothers, my aunt and most of my friends in the Tomaszow ghetto had been sent to the gas chambers in Treblinka. In total, about fourteen thousand Jews from the Tomaszow ghetto were sent to the Treblinka gas chambers where they were liquidated. About one thousand Jews remained in the Tomaszow ghetto which then became a forced labour camp.

Many children and old people died on their way to the gas chambers, suffocating on the trains. By all probabilities, both of my grandmothers would have died this way. I have never been able to find out whether they died on the way to Treblinka or in the gaschambers. I cannot imagine the horrible death in the gas chambers, or in the cattle carriages on the trains - packed to full capacity with no water or food and with the horrible stench of urine and excrement.

At my workshop I was offered the opportunity to make some money on the sly. One of my workmates approached me and said that he had a buyer who was prepared to pay cash for parts used in compressors and other components of pneumatic brakes. This involved stealing the parts from the workshop and getting cash for them. Naturally it was risky, because if you were caught with stealing the property from a German firm you were liable for either the death penalty or a death camp. I must say that I didn't have any moral scruples about doing this. I thought the Germans were our mortal enemies and stealing from them was a part of resistance against them. I think in this case old Machiavelli was right. The end justified the means. The defeat of the Germans justified anything. So I got engaged in these deals and made some money on the sly - although very little. It only allowed me to buy more bread and margarine.

In May 1943 the whole German propaganda machine started to exploit the news about the Polish officers who had been murdered in Katyn, in Russia. The Germans justly blamed the Russians for this massacre and tried to use it to their advantage. Their push on the eastern front had stalled and in a few months they started to retreat. Some people didn't believe that the Russians did this. They thought the Germans did it and then blamed the Russians.

From the beginning I was convinced that it was the work of the Russian NKVD. I remembered how they shot all the prisoners in the gaol in Lvov and set fire to the building so that the bodies would be burned.

In Warsaw there were raids and arrests and some hostages were taken but not on a mass scale as it had been in the ghetto. They did not shoot people at random in the streets. There were no dead bodies on the pavements. Although there was a curfew, and no radios were allowed, the cinemas and theatres were open even though it was thought unpatriotic for Poles to go to cinemas running German propaganda films or to the theatres. There were, of course, some theatres, cinemas, restaurants and coffee shops for Germans only. On the trams the front part of the carriages were reserved for the Germans.

My mother got a job as a companion to an old Polish lady. She had to keep her company in return for board and accommodation and a very small wage. It was good for her. The lady, of course, did not know that she was Jewish and the Germans and the Polish police would never have suspected that this lady would hide Jews in her house. This job was arranged for her by a friend of my father, a well-known Polish writer and playwright who had remained friendly with my mother after my father's death. He was not Jewish but he helped a large number of Jews, and hid some of them in his villa close to Warsaw.

In the meantime, my circle of Jewish friends in hiding was shrinking rapidly. They just kept disappearing. They would go out to do shopping or something else and not come back home. Apparently they were caught by blackmailers or directly by the Polish police or the Germans, and sent to gaol or death camps. This happened to the husband of my mother's friend in whose place I had been close to being arrested by the Germans.

One day I met in the street a former deputy mayor of Tomaszow, whom I knew. He was not Jewish, but he was living in hiding in Warsaw as he was an ex-official of the Polish government, and the

Germans did not like them. He gave me his phone number and said that I could call him if I needed help. It was very good of him to offer me help, knowing that fraternising with me could lead to his death and the death of his wife.

One day when I was at work three Gestapo came and arrested the accountant from the office. The rumour was that he was Jewish and that they had arrested him for this. My workmates started to look at me in a funny way. I thought that I could detect their suspicions that I was also Jewish, and I decided that it would be better to leave as soon as possible. In the lunch break I left the workshop and never went back. Of course I then had to change my address. I asked my mother to go to my room to collect my personal belongings. She told the landlady that I was involved in a resistance movement and had to move because the Germans were after me.

I went to my protector and asked him what to do. He said it would be best if I left Warsaw and enlisted to work for the Germans, either in Germany or in Russia in the east. There were German firms with contracts with the German airforce or German army, but they paid their workers low wages. They were sometimes very close to the front line and could be subjected to bombing or shelling. He thought that the east would be better because in Germany they subjected the workers to a close medical examination

which would disclose my penile shortcomings. He told me that in Russia there was no medical examination and that they took everybody. I could not stay long in Warsaw, as my workmates from the German firm knew my face and if I ran into one of them in the street he might denounce me to the Germans or to the Polish Police.

The German firms had offices in Warsaw. All I had to do was to go to one of these offices and volunteer for work. He told me to do it as soon as possible, because there was a delay of a few days between the acceptance by the firm and departure to Russia. In the meantime I had no place to sleep. I could not go to my mother. I could not go to my aunt in Milanowek because her place was finished as a hide-out. My protector was too exposed to the dangers to take me on as another burden. I really did not know what to do.

Then I remembered the ex-mayor of my home town who had offered to help me. I telephoned him, and luckily he was at home. He said to come in the evening and he gave me his address. I went there and met his wife, and they put me in the laundry to sleep on a folding bed. I stayed there for about a week. Meanwhile, I went to register for work in the east and they accepted me, as they were accepting everybody. I had a farewell parting with my mother and then I left.

The train journey to Smolensk was uneventful. I met my future workmates on the train. What a bunch of morons! They were all uneducated, unskilled manual workers; some of them were petty criminals and fugitives from justice. It took us about two days to get to Smolensk from Warsaw, due to stoppages on the way. On the train they fed us with air force food rations - the same as were given to German flyers and ground air force staff.

In Smolensk, after disembarking, we were led to another train and taken to a village about sixteen kilometres away. It was two or three kilometres from Katyn, where the Polish officers had been

murdered. We were given uniforms of the French Foreign Legion. Apparently, when the Germans conquered France, they took as spoils of victory, among other things, uniforms prepared for Foreign Legionnaires. These consisted of blue jackets and green pants. As well we had to wear air force overcoats and caps, but without the German eagle, the trademark of the German army. Also we were not allowed to wear belts. Afterwards, they showed us our barracks and segregated us according to our skills. I registered as an unskilled worker. They told me that they would send me to a forest another fifty or sixty kilometres away to fell trees. I stayed in this village for about a week before I was taken to the forest.

In the meantime I had to go through a public delousing bath with all of my workmates. There was a medical orderly examining our private parts for lice. Thank goodness he did not take any notice of my circumcision, and let me go through. The Germans were treating us as slaves, but without any killing or sadistic cruelty. For these few days I was digging trenches with the others, around Smolensk airport.

While we were there, they took us to the place where the Polish officers had been. It was a horrible sight. There was a smell of rotting bodies, and pieces of Polish uniforms, letters, documents and Polish banknotes lying on the ground everywhere. The Germans took us there especially to show us that this was the result of Russian cruelty, and to tell us that the Russians were the worst enemies of the Polish nation. The bodies of these Polish officers had been exhumed and shown to a number of commissions organised by the Germans, to reveal the Russian crimes to the whole world. Then the bodies were buried again. The Russian peasants living close by told us that under the bodies of the Polish officers there were bodies of Russians killed by the NKVD before the war. Apparently this had been a favourite shooting ground for the NKVD, during the time of Stalin's purges. The Germans were very proud of this discovery, and their propaganda machine worked full-time to exploit it.

There were two or three clever petty criminals among my workmates who collected the banknotes from the dead, and then managed to send them back to Warsaw for sale on the black market. The Germans somehow got wind of this scheme, caught the perpetrators and organised some sort of a court martial for them. They were punished by the confiscation of all of the money and a public beating, and for a few days they had to parade wearing placards saying, 'I am the swine who stole money from the dead Polish officers.'

German discipline close to the front line was rather strong. There was the case of a German sergeant-major who was caught fiddling with air force money. He was court-martialled and shot on the spot, before our very eyes. I was now not worried about being exposed by the Germans. I was more afraid of being exposed by my Polish workmates, who would not be above getting some benefits from the Germans for disclosing a Jew to them. I do not know if there were any other Jews hiding amongst us, but it was quite possible.

Luckily, after a few days, I was sent to the forest where there were no delousing baths and medical examinations. Our task there was cutting down trees, and each one of us had a number of trees to fell each day. Our saws were rusty, and it was not easy to fulfil the daily quota. There was a German outfit with machine guns guarding us against the partisans. We were billeted among Russian peasants. Twice a week a truck would come from Smolensk with canned food rations for us. We had no kitchen so the only way to eat anything cooked was to make a deal with the Russian peasants - they cooked for us for money, cigarettes or vodka. We were getting a bottle of vodka, I think, every two weeks together with cigarettes.

It was already full summer, and very hot in the day time. There were very tall trees in the forest, mainly pines. We did not hear any guns, although we were quite close to the front line. We neither saw nor heard from the Russian partisans, who were supposed to be everywhere. From time to time, German reconnaissance planes flew over our forest, and German infantry and artillery outfits and tanks passed over the unsealed road through the forest, towards the front line.

In our village there were many women and children. Most men had been either taken by the Russians into the Red Army when they were retreating in 1941, or taken afterwards by the Germans as hostages, or for work in Germany. We never discussed politics with them. On Sundays the Russian youth gathered together and sang songs and played folk music. I found the Russians musically talented. Their standards of hygiene were reasonable. They did not wash every day, but had a kind of communal Roman bath where they went once a week to get rid of dirt and lice. We would also use this bath. It was dark inside the bath-house so nobody could see my body's shortcomings.

I did not make friends with any Russians, nor with any of my workmates, except of one with whom I drank vodka. I managed to send letters to my mother through the air force post, and she wrote back to me. All of her letters were full of cryptic messages which, on the whole, I could not understand. She was trying to inform me about the war situation in Europe.

Due to the shortage of men in Russia, one or two of my Polish workmates started to live with Russian war widows. It was rather quiet and idyllic in the forest, and in the village where we were billeted. We were far from the German administration, far from the hustle and bustle of the front line and far from Smolensk

which was, by Russian standards, a middle-sized town. Our German leader was not too harsh, although I don't remember a day when we fulfilled our daily quota of tree felling. Our German guards were always half asleep because they did not work; they only had to guard us against partisans. As there were no partisans in sight, the Germans became complacent and very content with their job. It was certainly better and safer for them than the front line.

I tried to improve my Russian by talking to the peasants and reading Russian books. I had studied Russian in high school, but I was never fluent in the language and my accent was, I was told, atrocious. This quiet idyll lasted until about the end of September 1943. Then the Germans started their full retreat to the West.

Prior to this I had had a letter from my mother from which I understood that the Americans and the English had landed in Sicily. Our German language papers and German radio broadcasts did not disclose this to us, of course.

The days were shortening and it was getting colder with the approach of winter. We knew that very soon we would be moved from the forest to the base close to Smolensk, and then back to the west. I thought about hiding somewhere, and waiting for the Russians, but I gave up this idea as it was too risky. Nobody knew how long the German resistance would last, and it was very hard to find a good hide-out in the forest. I could have been discovered by the Germans and shot on the spot. If the Russian partisans had discovered me they would have killed me without finding out whether or not I was German, or an enemy of the Germans. Also, I could not collect enough food to last for a few

weeks, and if I had been found by Russian peasants I would have been promptly delivered to the Germans. It was not worth taking the risk. I decided to stick with my job with the German firm; to hope for the best and expect the worst.

One day two or three trucks came and took us back to the base near Smolensk, with all our gear. The trees cut down by us were left in the forest. Our German guards and their machine guns also came back with us. It then turned out that the Russian peasants were also leaving with the Germans. They were scared that they would be accused by the Red Army of collaborating with the Germans and, anyway, they were mainly anti-Communist.

From Smolensk we went by train to Minsk and then to Vilnius. Vilnius was, at that time, a part of Lithuania, which was, of course, occupied by the Germans. I do not even know if there was a Lithuanian government, or whether it was just administered by the Germans in the same manner as Poland was. Before the War, Vilnius had been a part of Poland, then when the Russians took over the eastern part of Poland together with the Baltic states, Vilnius became a part of socialist Lithuania and a part of the Soviet Union. In 1941 the Germans took over, in their push to the east. But Vilnius was really a Polish city, inhabited by Poles and, before the War, by a large number of Jews.

When we came to Vilnius in November 1943 there were no Jews. The Vilnius ghetto had been liquidated the previous year, and many thousands of Jews had been executed by the Germans and by their Lithuanian proxies. We lived in barracks close to the Vilnius airport, and were engaged in all sorts of manual work connected with the airport. I managed to get a job as the off-sider to a Polish truck driver. This truck driver was a drunk but he did

teach me how to drive a truck. I had a driver's licence which I had obtained in Warsaw, so all I needed was driving practice. The truck driver was constantly drunk, so I had to drive for him while he was asleep trying to sober up. We had to deliver all sorts of things in the truck - from the city to the airport and from the airport back to the city and to our base very close to the airport.

The head of the base was a German sergeant-major who was very unpleasant and rather sadistic. Unlike the Germans in Smolensk, he used to beat up the Polish workers for no reason. Even the Germans did not like him. He was a great disciplinarian, and very harsh on his own men and on us slave workers.

On one of our trips while I was driving, my Polish driver told me to stop the truck and said that he would drive the rest of the way back to the base. He was still slightly drunk, and I told him not to do it but he insisted. We swapped places and he took the wheel. A few minutes later he collided with a truck driven by Slovaks from the Slovak army. There were Slovak auxilliaries fighting with the Germans against the Russians, and they had a base close to Vilnius. There was also a Spanish base close to Vilnius where there was a number of Spanish volunteers fighting the Russians. They were well known for being corrupt, and were ready to sell whatever they could to anybody prepared to pay the price. In this way Polish resistance groups obtained a lot of arms from the Spaniards.

Anyway, we collided with the Slovak truck. Both trucks stopped, and when the Slovaks discovered that my driver was slightly drunk they started to abuse us and I thought that they would shoot us on the spot. They were armed and we were not. Luckily, a German military police car came and they saved us from the wrath of the

Slovaks. We were both arrested by the German police and taken back to the base to the sergeant-major. He beat us up, and then disqualified my Polish driver from any further driving. I was sent back to dig trenches. I was not happy with this. It was a large base with a few hundred slave workers and we had to undergo delousing every few weeks. This was very risky for me.

I started trying to think of ways to escape from the drudgery of the degrading work, and from the whole set up. I knew that there were Polish partisans around Vilnius and I started to wonder how I could get in touch with them. There were two or three inns in Vilnius which were especially for the German soldiers and all their auxilliaries, including us. Polish civilians were not allowed, but the waiters and the members of the orchestras were Poles. I approached one of the waiters, and asked him whether he could get me into contact with somebody from the Polish resistance. He agreed to this.

After a few days he told me to come to his place to meet somebody from the Polish underground army, the so-called Home Army. He did not give me the address, of course, but we agreed to meet at the junction of two streets in Vilnius. I went there with my mate with whom I used to drink in the forest. The waiter took us to his flat, where we met a fellow from the Home Army. He examined us and said that he would be glad to take us and maybe other young fellows from among the Polish workers at the airport. He told us what life was like in the underground, and he agreed to meet us in a couple of days in another place in Vilnius from where we would be taken to the base of the Polish partisans. Security was very strict; each meeting was at a different place, we did not know any of their names and they did not know our names - they only knew our faces. We said that we could perhaps persuade two or three others to join us.

The next day my drinking mate and I decided to go to the cinema prior to going to the forest. There was one cinema for the members of the German army and all their auxiliaries. The cinema was full of German infantrymen as well as a few Spaniards, a few Lithuanians in Lithuanian police uniforms and the two of us. I still remember the movie - it was a German musical with Marika Rök, called 'The Stars of Rio'. A musical without any German propaganda in it.

Afterwards, the Lithuanian policemen surrounded the two of us in the street in front of the cinema, and said that they were going to arrest us. We asked why and they said that they would tell us at the police station. When we refused to go they started to beat us and a fist fight ensued. There were about ten Lithuanians and only two of us, so we would have been beaten in no time. Luckily a group of German gendarmes were passing by. They stopped the fight and took us, together with the Lithuanians, to the station of the German gendarmerie. It turned out that the Lithuanians could not really speak German - my German was much better than theirs. I somehow persuaded the German gendarmes that they had wanted to arrest us for nothing, just because we were Poles and because they hated Poles. The Germans thought both Lithuanians and Poles were sub-human beings, but in this case, as we were in the minority and the Lithuanians really could not show any cause for our arrest, the Germans told the Lithuanians to go back to their station and one of the Germans drove us back to our base. It was probably the first and only time in my life that a German gendarme had saved me from somebody else. At the base the boys greeted us as heroes, and started to prepare a plan to attack the Lithuanian police station the next day and to beat the Lithuanians up. Somehow I managed to talk them out of it.

The next day the Lithuanians complained to the German chief of the base. He called us in, beat us up of course, and locked us up for twenty four hours. He said that he did not want any problems with the Lithuanians or with anybody else. I promised myself that, if and when I joined the Polish underground, I would organise a raid on our base, and would kill the bastard.

After our twenty four hour detention up we were let out, and the next day we went to the inn to see our Polish Home Army contact. This time he told us to meet him at a different place in Vilnius, and from there we were to go straight to the partisans. We managed to persuade only one other boy to go with us. And so we departed, in our silly French Foreign Legion uniforms covered by German air force overcoats. We did not have any weapons, and we did not manage to steal any from our German overlords.

We met our waiter at the appointed meeting place, and he introduced us to somebody from the Polish partisans. We went with him on foot to the outskirts of Vilnius, where there was a sleigh waiting for us. It was already December; there was snow everywhere and it was very cold. We got into the sleigh and left Vilnius, travelling towards the forest. There were no Germans or Lithuanians around; the roads were deserted. After a few hours our horse got so tired we had to disembark and finish our trip on foot. When we came close to the partisan's base, the sentry, seeing our German overcoats, started to shoot at us. Luckily they missed. We had to lay down and wait for our guide to go to the sentries and explain to them that we were new volunteers and not Germans. It took some time, and in the meantime I thought that I would freeze to death.

Finally, we were let into the little village where the Home Army base was. The whole outfit then consisted of less than 100 men.

The chief was a pre-war professional commissioned Polish officer. It was one of the rules of the underground army that nobody knew anybody else's surname. We all had to chose pseudonyms, so my drinking mate from the forest took the pseudonym of Negro, the other one called himself Blood in the memory of the film 'Captain Blood' and I was called Gigant, although I was not abnormally large. Maybe it was because I was clumsy.

Soon we were called before the chief. He questioned us, especially as to our military experience. In high school I had had two years of weekly military exercises with a sergeant of the Polish army. That was, of course, before the War. Under the Bolsheviks we had had the same with a Red Army sergeant. Both the Polish and the Red Army sergeants had been drunks, and were always begging us for money for vodka. They didn't teach us much, so I knew nothing and my two mates from the Luftwaffe did not know anything either. The chief said that we would have a crash course in how to shoot, how to clean a rifle and in how to use explosives. We were trained in using explosives and in combat and in ordinary drill as in any other army.

We were billeted in the village. The natives were Bielo-Russians. They spoke Polish, but between themselves they spoke Bielo-Russian, which is closer to Ukrainian and Russian than to Polish. Even though they had to feed us, they were glad that we were there, because when Polish partisans were in a village the Germans and their Lithuanian proxies kept away and did not plunder. In the daytime we mostly slept, fully dressed, on straw on the floors of the peasant huts. The food from the peasants was richer and better than the German food, although it was very monotonous - bread and bacon or meat with no vegetables or fruit. As usual there was plenty of moonshine vodka. There

was plenty of potatoes, bread, meat and so called bliny - the Russian equivalent of pancakes. As I said before, the peasants were willingly giving it to us as we protected them from plunder by the Lithuanian Police and the Germans.

In spite of sleeping in our uniforms, we did not have any lice, at least none that I knew about. Once a week we used to have a bath in what was a cross between a sauna and a steam bath, in a bath house which was dark, which suited me. Most of the boys in the outfit were sons of Polish doctors, lawyers, school teachers or small landowners. They were members of the so-called Polish intelligentsia and intellectually far, far above my workmates in the German air force outfit. They were Polish patriots, who were mostly under twenty five. There were also a few professionals from the pre-War Polish army. We had one medical practitioner with us.

We were marching at night-time, followed from time to time by the Lithuanian proxies or the Germans. The Germans rarely ventured outside Vilnius. Only the main road from Vilnius to Warsaw in the west, and Minsk in the east was safe for the movement of German army trucks, cars and motor bikes. In the forest there were Polish partisans, Russian partisans, Lithuanian police, a few German gendarmes and bandits without any political affiliation. I guessed that there were probably also Jews hiding in the forest. I was not so naive and stupid to disclose my racial background to my new colleagues in the underground army.

I liked the night marches through the forest with everything covered by snow. I used to get a particular thrill when I went first as the vanguard, with the rest of the outfit following me one by one. We had no sleighs or trucks, so we did a lot of marching.

After a few days the chief planned that we should ambush a German truck on the road to Vilnius and to use me and my mates in our air force overcoats to do this. We decided that I would stop the truck along with another partisan who spoke German very well. We put him into one of our German coats. The rest of the outfit waited in the bushes close to the road, ready to shoot. For the purpose of the ambush, they gave me a German 9-millimetre pistol with a full magazine and another spare magazine. The plan was that we would stop any truck on the road and ask for a lift. Then we were to shoot the German driver and his off-sider, and the boys in the bushes would start shooting at the back of the truck, if it was carrying German soldiers.

It was a very cold, moonlit night; very quiet, with no wind. The traffic was very light. Two or three columns of trucks full of German soldiers passed us, but we waited in the ditch, and did not stop them. We wanted to ambush only one truck so there would be fewer German soldiers to shoot.

After a wait of about two hours, we heard the engine of an approaching truck. From the sound of it, there was only one truck. We decided to move into the middle of the road. But it did not work as planned. Although we were in the middle of the road, waving our arms, the German driver passed us, and stopped the truck about a hundred metres on. A German in a uniform climbed out from the driver's cabin and started to walk back towards us. We moved towards him and when he came close to us I asked if he would give us a lift to Vilnius and he said he would. He turned his back to us, and started to walk towards the car. We followed him. All of a sudden, one of the boys in the bushes lost his nerve, and started to shoot at the back of the truck. The German turned back to us and I shouted; 'Hands up'. He would not lift his hands, so I took out my pistol and started to

shoot. The German fell to the ground and the Germans in the back of the truck started to shoot at us, and at the bushes where the boys from the outfit were. I fell to the ground, and my mate, who was in the middle of the road, did the same. I emptied the first magazine of my pistol into the German who was still trying to crawl towards the truck. The other German in the cabin of the truck apparently decided to leave, and started to rev the engine. I tried to reload my pistol and shoot at the tyres, but the driver was too quick, and sped off towards Vilnius. The German I shot was dead in the ditch. It was an exhilarating experience! I had killed my first German and I hoped there would be more of them. We took the boots and uniform from the dead German and we put the body into the ditch and covered it with snow. The only sign of the ambush was his blood on the snow.

We went back to the base and the chief abused us for our unsuccessful ambush. The plan had been to stop the truck, and to take it. We had only managed to kill one German and maybe another one in the back of the truck. Our failure was due to the fellow who had started to shoot while we were talking to the German.

After two or three days our intelligence sources informed us that as a result of our ambush two more Germans had died in Vilnius in hospital, but the truck had returned to its base. However, it was quite a new experience for me and I was very proud that I had killed my first German in combat.

The Home Army outfit I had joined was the 3rd Brigade of the Home Army - Vilnius District. The pseudonym of the Commandant was Szczerbiec. He had been a professional pre-War commissioned officer in the Polish Army. His pseudonym was the name of the

sword of one of the Polish kings in the Tenth Century who had conquered Kijev in the Ukraine. This sword was a national treasure.

When I joined the outfit we numbered about one hundred people. We were divided into three platoons with thirty men in each platoon. Platoons were divided into ten man detachments. Each platoon and each detachment had its leader. We were constantly on the move, sleeping mainly in the daytime and marching from one village to another during the night. The Lithuanian Police and the Germans were constantly after us. The Lithuanian Police had a lot of informers amongst the peasants, but we also had our informers, spies and couriers in Vilnius. In theory, our headquarters were in Warsaw and there was a General who led Vilnius District of the Home Army. The whole Home Army was under the command of the Polish Government-in-exile in London. We were supposed to be preparing the Polish underground army to take over after the retreating Germans and before the Red Army. That was, I think, the general idea which, however, failed in practice later on.

It was December 1943, the middle of a very harsh winter, and the temperatures were, on the average, around minus twenty centigrade. The trees in the forest were covered by snow, the roads were covered by snow and the peasants used sleighs for transportation. We had to march on foot along snow-covered roads through the forest, leaving our footprints in the snow. There were always two or three of us in the vanguard, and then behind came the whole outfit in a single line, moving without talking and without smoking cigarettes. All of the area around Vilnius was forested and, with the snow all over the ground it was good terrain for cross-country skiing. Later on, we had a detachment of skiers in white uniforms which had been taken from the

Germans, and also a detachment of cavalrymen. I was in the infantry. I once tried to ride a horse, but without much success; I thought that my feet would freeze in the iron stirrups. I put wads of newspaper into my boots but it did not help. Consequently, I said that I preferred infantry to cavalry.

In our camp we talked about everything and nothing. Some of the boys had left their girlfriends in Vilnius and were getting letters from them and pining for them. There was a lot of drinking as there was an abundance of moonshine vodka.

After the fiasco with the ambush of the German truck, we saw no action for a few weeks. We were moving from one village to another, without seeing any Germans or Lithuanians. One day, the Commandant gave orders to attack some bunkers in the forest where, according to our informers and the peasants, there were Red Army partisans and/or bandits. The action was to take place the next day.

Early in the morning we moved towards the bunkers, led by our guide. The bunkers were deep in the forest, far away from any villages. About two or three kilometres from the bunkers we stopped and formed a loose formation with about twenty or twenty-five metres between each of us, and we moved with our weapons ready, towards the bunkers. Then it came to me in a flash that I had a dilemma. I knew that there could be Jews hiding among the Russian partisans. What would I do if confronted by one of them? If I didn't shoot he could shoot me first. Luckily for me there was only one bunker, far to the left of my position. It was overrun easily by our outfit and all of the people inside were shot on the spot. There were about six or seven of them, without any women. They had Red Army uniforms. I

do not know if there were any Jews among them. Of course, I kept my mouth shut, and did not make any comment. My mates in the outfit were elated. 'See', they said, 'we fight the Germans and we fight the Russians, for independent Poland.' We took the weapons and the boots of the dead Russian partisans and destroyed the bunker. The local peasants were pleased and grateful.

On Christmas Day we had to go to church. This was very much against my liking, but I had no choice, I had to follow everybody. We went to the church with our weapons, and the priest gave a long, patriotic sermon which was meant to lift our spirits.

Sometimes there was room in our partisan lives for other sorts of entertainment. On a few occasions, when we knew that there were no Germans close to us, we organised a get-together in the open with everybody except sentries, sitting around the fire singing songs, reciting poetry or telling jokes and funny stories. There were, of course, bottles of vodka passed around, and for a few hours we could forget that there was a war going on, and that any minute we could be ambushed. The Commandant thought it was a good idea to have such gatherings which were mainly for our relaxation and to boost our morale.

The discipline in the outfit was generally rigid. I did not hear about any stealing from the peasants, or rapes or attempted rapes, which were common with the Lithuanian Police and the Russian partisans. During my time with the outfit there were two or three court martials for beating a peasant and one, I remember, for pack-raping a local village whore.

We had a wireless, so we knew what's happening on the Russian front, and in Italy and Africa. The news was encouraging. The Germans were retreating everywhere. I thought that I must be now doubly careful not to get killed just before the end of my ordeal. I managed to send a letter to my mother in Warsaw, through a contact in Vilnius. I even got a letter back from her which was, of course, a great joy. At least I knew that she was still alive. She was working for the same old lady; managing her household and reading boring books to her.

I felt great with the partisans. I was not a sub-human as I had been in the ghetto. I was one of the boys. Naturally, they did not know my real identity but somehow this did not worry me very much. I thought that nobody would ever suspect me of being Jewish, as I had come from the Germans, in a German uniform. I could, of course, be killed at any time but I was condemned to death by the Germans anyway. I was not very afraid of meeting death in action. This was a different sort of fear and not comparable to the fear I had felt in the ghetto, and in Warsaw on the Aryan side. That had been a soul destroying fear; knowing that at any time I could be arrested and shot on the spot, or sent to a death camp and suffer torture before being put to death.

We had a few skirmishes with the Lithuanian Police, without any clear victory for us or for them. I started to feel that I was pretty well experienced in partisan warfare. I knew how to use all sorts of weapons, and I knew how to use explosives. My outfit grew bigger and bigger as new boys from Vilnius joined us, and some local young peasants as well.

One day four or five Frenchmen joined us. They were not soldiers, but had been working for the Germans, and had somehow

got in touch with our intelligence and joined up. The trouble with them was that they did not speak Polish, and only a few of us spoke French. During action they did not know where to shoot; there always had to be an interpreter with them; pointing out the enemy. I was once next to them in an action. I did not speak French, and they kept asking, 'Boch? Polonais?' Thank goodness another of my mates spoke French, and he explained to the Frenchmen who was who. They were courageous boys, hundreds of miles from their country and their families, in an environment completely unknown to them.

The countryside was ours. The Germans were quite happy just to keep the Vilnius-Minsk and Vilnius-Warsaw highways open. Small units of Germans and Lithuanian policemen kept bothering us, but on the whole, after a number of skirmishes, we were the winning side. Whenever we killed Germans or Lithuanians we took their uniforms and weapons and boots, and, of course, cigarettes if they had any. I was still wearing my civvy Foreign Legion uniform and air force overcoat. We all had red and white armbands and Polish Army caps bearing the Polish eagle.

Early one morning in the middle of January 1944, we were still asleep after an all night march, when our sentries sounded an alarm. I woke up to the sound of gunshots and quickly got up and ran outside the house where we were sleeping. We were, as usual, fully dressed, so it did not take us much time to form a line of defence on the outskirts of the village. In front of us there was about one kilometre of empty, treeless space covered with snow. We were behind the trees on the outskirts of the village. A detachment of Germans and Lithuanian policemen were advancing through this open field towards us, with one machine gun and carbines firing. We returned fire with our carbines, and, a few

minutes later, our machine guns were in place and we opened fire on the advancing enemy. They were plainly visible on the snow. The bullets were whistling around my ears and I kept firing at the Germans and the Lithuanians, who were trying to change their position every few minutes.

After about ten minutes of this exchange of fire, the enemy started to retreat. They probably had some casualties, but we could not be sure from our position. Then one of our platoon leaders screamed, 'Forward boys, get on to them'. We left our well-covered position, and started to advance through the open snowfield, firing all the time. We moved forward in a loose formation, firing and falling to the ground, and getting up and firing again and falling to the ground again. The Germans were now retreating rapidly, and their machine gun stopped firing. There were only sporadic carbine shots from them. I fell to the ground, and aimed at one of the moving targets in front of me.

All of a sudden I felt that something had hit my right forearm and I fainted. The last thing I remember was the blood in the snow around my right forearm. When I came to, I was on a stretcher, and our doctor, aptly nicknamed Lancet, was examining my arm. I had been shot, but luckily the carbine bullet did not touch the bone. It went through the flesh, causing me to faint for a short period and causing a loss of blood. Lancet put some disinfectant on the wound, and put a bandage around it. It really hurt badly, and I could not do anything with my right hand because of the wound. All the doctor could do was to clean the wound and change the bandage every day. He gave me a sling so that at least I could walk. It was decided that I should go away for a rest and join the outfit again in about two weeks. Anyway I was lucky that the bullet passed my head by two inches and passed my forearm bone within less than a quarter of an inch. I could easily have lost my life or my right hand or arm.

They told me that the Germans and Lithuanians had retreated completely, leaving behind them a few dead, and the machine gun, some carbines and ammunition. They were routed although we had been caught without any forewarning. From that time on they did not molest us. We were the aggressors, not the Germans.

I was put on a sleigh, and the doctor and two boys from the outfit went with me and the peasant who owned the sleigh. They took me to a nearby manor owned by a lady whose husband was a Polish officer who was in Germany in an officers' prisoner-of-war camp. She was somehow involved in the Home Army movement and had offered her manor to us. She was in her late fifties and had twin daughters who were about my age. Lancet gave her a supply of bandages and some disinfectant to wash my wound. He said that he would come back in about a week's time, to see how I was going. In the meantime I was to rest, and not to show myself outside the buildings in case the peasants noticed my presence. Mind you, there were informers everywhere and my lady hostess was well aware of this.

She and her daughters put up a folding bed in the attic, where I was to sit all day and to sleep. She even gave me her husband's pyjamas, which she said should fit me. Then she told me I was to eat with them, but that she could not promise me caviar and oysters. They were very limited with food. They had to make compulsory deliveries of crop and cattle and other produce to the Germans, which left very little for them to survive on. I was in pain, and did not register everything she had said.

As it was becoming dark, my hostess brought me a cup of tea and a piece of bread with white cheese. I ate it and fell asleep. In the morning one of the girls brought in a tray with tea and bread and white cheese again, and a washing basin which she filled with water. I washed myself as well as I could with my left hand, ate

my breakfast and went to sleep again. Then my hostess woke me up and changed the dressing on my wound.

My hostess was a very pious woman. There were crosses and Madonnas and portraits of saints everywhere on the walls. She was always crossing herself, and murmuring prayers under her breath. The girls were quite good looking; as they were twins they looked very much alike. One of them brought me a book to read, but instead of reading I fell asleep again. I must have been exhausted after the wounding and loss of blood. This went on for a few days. At the end of the week Lancet came with two boys from the outfit. He examined me and said that in a week's time I could return to the outfit. He said he would send somebody with a sleigh to fetch me.

As I started getting better, I was not sleeping so much and I became restless in my bed. I wanted to go; I had had enough of this. The manor was rather cold because they didn't have much coal or wood to heat the place and outside it was still about minus twenty centigrade all the time. At night I could hear wolves howling. They were probably after the pigs and cattle belonging to my hostess. Then, in the middle of one night, one of the girls came up to my attic. It was pitch dark and I did not know which girl it was. She stopped in front of my bed, eased out of her nightshirt and climbed into the bed. She unbuttoned my pyjamas and sat astride of me. After a short foreplay, she started to vigorously make love to me. I asked her her name, but she would not answer. She did not utter one word as she was so busy lovemaking. I told her: 'Watch my right forearm because it is still very painful.' I was lying on my back, with my right arm as far aside as I could move it, and she was on top of me, moaning with delight. She must have been sex

starved, and so was I, after the long months of compulsory celibacy. After some time, the girl got out of bed, put on her nightshirt and left. It was close to dawn but it was still dark in the room, and I had no idea which one of the daughters it was. I only knew that she was not a virgin when she came to me for the first time and that she obviously enjoyed what she was doing.

In the morning, I went down to the dining room to have breakfast with my hostess and the two girls. I looked at the girls carefully but still could not work out which one of them had been my night visitor. One of the girls asked me: 'Did you hear the wolves howling?' 'No', I said. She replied: 'I couldn't sleep all night because of the wolves. How come you didn't hear them?' That night my visitor came again, and again I could not discover who she was. I tried to light a match but she would not let me and again she did not utter a word. I thought then that it would not be a bad idea to stay on there until the end of the War, but this was out of the question - for several reasons. The manor was subject to frequent raids by the Germans and the Lithuanian police, and sooner or later they would have discovered me. Also, the peasants could have noticed me and informed the police about my presence. My hostess could have thrown me out after a few weeks because of fear of German reprisals if they had found me there. And, finally, the girl could have tired of me, and could have told her mother to throw me out.

My hostess came back from a short trip to Vilnius and at dinner time told us a long story about one of her friends who had been denounced as a courier for the Home Army, and arrested by the Germans. After a long interrogation during which she did not betray anything, the Germans had executed her in the Gestapo prison in Vilnius. She said, 'Just imagine, they have thrown her into a common grave with some executed Jews. So the poor thing is lying next to dead Jews.' I thought this very amusing

because little did she know that at night time one of her own daughters was lying next to a Jew who was very alive.

Shortly afterwards, the boys from the outfit came to fetch me, and I left the manor. I never did find out which one of the girls was my lover.

When I came back to the outfit I still had my right arm in a sling but it was not so painful. The main problem I had was in washing and shaving. I found that I had lice in my dressing, and the doctor started to change it twice a day. It was not so cold any more, and I could feel the coming of spring. The snows were melting slowly and the forest and the meadows became green.

One day I asked permission to see the Commandant. I asked him for permission to arrange a raid on Vilnius airport where I had worked for the Germans. The object would be to kill the German chief of the whole work establishment for the German air force. I said that I needed two men to go with me, three pistols with silencers, a sleigh to take us to Vilnius, and German uniforms. The Commandant agreed. I picked as my crew the boy who had come with me to the outfit from the Germans, and another boy who was born in Danzig, which had been a Baltic Free State before the War. He spoke German fluently as well as Polish - that was why I wanted him. I do not remember the name of this German Gauleiter, but he was a real bastard. He used to beat everybody without any justification, and after my altercation with the Lithuanians he had beaten me up with his riding crop - I do not know why. He had explained it very elegantly, saying that he did not want any trouble with any f.... Lithuanians and f.... Poles.

Before the raid we had to find out which barracks he slept in. We intended to surprise him during the night, when everybody was asleep and very few sentries were posted outside the camp. The

Germans believed that because they were so close to the airport and the almighty German air force, nobody would try any tricks with them.

Our intelligence found out the location of the barrack where our victim slept. As planned, we went to Vilnius by sleigh and, bypassing the city, we went straight to the airport. Before we reached the airport we left the sleigh and went on foot in our German uniforms. If somebody had approached us we would pretend that we were the members of the Polish workforce from the airport. We still had our documents from the Germans, except for Wodnik, who was the chap from Danzig. He did not have any documents. Anyway, we planned to go there in the middle of the night, hoping that nobody would stop us and, in fact, nobody did. There were very few sentries, and all of them were asleep.

We found the German's barracks. As there was no need for talking German, I left Wodnik outside the barracks and I went into the room with my other mate. The door of the bedroom was not locked, and we went in without any problem. It was dark but not completely dark, and I could see his body under the quilt on the bed. Unfortunately, there was another body next to him. That was a surprise but there was no time to think about it or to consult with anybody, so I emptied the magazine of my pistol into his body. The silencer worked well, but there was a bit of noise. The body next to him turned out to be his mistress, who could have been German, Polish or Lithuanian - we did not know. The German was killed instantly, without even waking up, but the girl started to scream and I put my hand over her mouth to silence her. Then my team-mate shot her. There was blood everywhere, but we had not woken anybody else, thanks to the silencers. In the room we left a poster which we had prepared, stating that he was killed by the Home Army because of his ill

treatment of Polish workers. We left immediately and sneaked out of the compound. We went on foot to the outskirts of Vilnius where, at an appointed place, a sleigh was waiting to take us back to the forest.

I thought the mission had been accomplished very well, but the Commandant abused me for shooting the woman. 'I do not want the Home Army to appear to be cruel by shooting women', he said. 'What could I do?' I replied, 'She saw us, and as she was sleeping with him, she must have been either German, Lithuanian or Polish but a German collaborator anyway'. Later on we found out through our intelligence that the woman was his German mistress whom he had brought from Hamburg, where he had lived before the War.

The Germans put posters around Vilnius setting a price for our heads, but without our names, because they did not know them, and without any drawings of our faces. That was my second German victim, and the last one that I knew that I had killed. Later on, when I shot at the enemy in action I never knew whether I had shot anybody or not, and hand-to-hand combat with bayonets did not occur in my military career.

Life in the forest went on as before. The unit was growing - now we not only had the Frenchmen, we also had an Austrian deserter from the German army and some Dutchmen who had worked for the Germans on the railway.

Having to go to church every second or third Sunday bothered me. Firstly, because I had always been very atheistic, I did not like going to church on principle. Secondly, I was a bit scared that somebody might notice that my behaviour in the church was not exactly the behaviour of a pious Catholic who knows what to do and how to do it. The priests were always delivering patriotic sermons, and I hated it.

Then I did something which was rather foolish, because I put my life at risk. I tried to persuade the boys in my detachment that it was against our religion to go to church with carbines and weapons. I explained to them that it was silly to go to church and pray while we carried murderous weapons in our hands. Some of the boys agreed with me, and a delegation went to the Commandant and told him our concern. The Commandant called us 'Communist Youth', but finally said that anyone who did not want to go to church did not have to go - it was not compulsory. So, I stopped going to church.

April 1944 was the first anniversary of the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto. On our wireless we heard speeches from America and England honouring the dead Jewish fighters, and glorifying the uprising. Most of my mates in the unit were outraged. They did not like praising the Jews at all. I did not open my mouth, of course, but this incident reminded me of my false identity. I knew that if I had told anybody that I was Jewish something nasty would have happened to me. I really do not know what they would have done but they definitely would not have liked the idea of fighting with a Jew in their ranks. Although I was told that the orders to the Home Army from London were to protect Polish citizens, regardless of their religion, here in the forest, far away from London, the implementation of these orders was a different matter. I had heard of Home Army units executing Jews in the same manner as NSZ outfits. The NSZ were Polish partisans under the command of the right wing extremist nationalist party. They were known for killing Jews and Communists alike. Anyway, I still had my head on my body and I believed I would survive.

One day I lost one of my best friends in the unit. After dinner we were sitting around a table inside a peasant's hut and talking. This friend of mine took out his pistol, which was a

Russian revolver and started to play Russian roulette. You put one bullet in the chamber and then push the chamber and shoot at your temple. If you are unlucky you shoot yourself, if you are lucky you do not. This fellow was unlucky and shot himself, and the bullet went through his brain. He was unconscious and he died two days later. We gave him a decent burial. I will never understand why he did this. It was either complete madness, or bravado. It showed that we were all young boys destabilised by the conditions under which we lived. I was probably more destabilised than the others, but I did not play Russian roulette. This chap who shot himself was a very intelligent boy, well-read and well-educated and brave in action. I felt his loss for a long time afterwards.

One day we attacked a little village where there was a station of Lithuanian Police. It was on the shore of a lake, and to get to the police station we had to cross the lake where there were no trees or other cover. The Lithuanians started to shoot at us as soon as we attempted to cross the lake. The bullets were whistling around as we ran across the lake. Luckily, the Lithuanians were very lousy shots and nobody was hit. We surrounded the police station and threw hand grenades inside. Some of the Lithuanians surrendered, but some went upstairs and barricaded themselves on the first floor. We could not dislodge them - we had the station surrounded for about two hours without any positive result. We tried to set fire to the building, but it was too wet to catch fire. It was very hard to come close to the building as the Lithuanians kept shooting at us from the first floor windows. We lost two boys, and finally had to retreat.

This village was populated by a strange religious sect. They were believers in the Old Testament and followed, more or less,

the Jewish religion, but they were not Jews. They were called Karaim. I had never heard of this sect before. Apparently the Germans tolerated them as Aryans despite their Jewish religious beliefs.

We heard from our informers and from our intelligence that the Germans had formed a Lithuanian army to fight the Polish partisans. A Lithuanian, General Plechavicius, was appointed as the Commander of this army. The rumour was that they would shortly march from Vilnius to annihilate all of us.

In the meantime I was promoted to the rank of corporal. Napoleon and Hitler started as corporals, I think, and then advanced to the top. I started as a private and finished as a corporal.

One day I saw three chaps who looked very Jewish in front of the Commandant's hut. Of course, I kept as far away from them as I could. Later on I saw them going back towards Vilnius, escorted by a few cavalrymen. I found out subsequently that they were Jewish escapees from the Vilnius ghetto, who were wanting to join the underground. However, the Commandant had refused to accept them. I do not think that he was extremely anti-Semitic, but most of the boys were and he knew that he would have problems if he accepted them. Anyway they were taken back to Vilnius. This episode really irked me. We had in our unit Frenchmen and Dutchmen and one Austrian, but they would not take Jews. At least they did not kill them.

I am generally a rather cool and level headed person and it is not easy to push me into something stupid, but with all this pretence and concealing of my real identity, I was at the end of my tether.

Our intelligence sources informed us that the Lithuanian army which was after us was in a little town not far from our temporary quarters. A battle plan was conceived quickly. The Commandant called all platoon leaders and detachment leaders and the Chief of Staff to put the battle in motion. The plan was to travel at dusk towards the town where the Lithuanians were, surround the town from all sides and then, on the signal of a flare, to attack. Apparently the Lithuanians did not have any fortifications, barbed wire or trenches to protect them. They obviously felt sure of their victory. There were about three or four hundred of them, with machine guns, sub-machine guns, carbines and one mortar. They did not have heavy guns and they did not have any tanks. We did not have them either. They had plenty of ammunition - we did not. We had less machine guns and sub-machine guns than they had.

In the middle of the night we left our quarters, and after a long march surrounded the town where the Lithuanians were. The enemy was not aware of our proximity, as they did not expect us to attack them. I was with my detachment in the middle of my platoon, in front of the town. Then the word went around to prepare for assault. I had my carbine, with a bayonet mounted on it. There was a possibility of hand-to-hand combat with the Lithuanians. Then a flare lit the sky and we started to shoot and advance forward from all sides. The Lithuanians answered our fire, the bullets started to whistle. We were moving forward in a loose formation; falling down, shooting, getting up and running forward, falling down again and shooting and so on. They returned our fire and we suffered some losses - a few wounded and a few killed. During all of this I was not at all scared - I felt thrilled. It was a great experience to take part in an attack - charging and shooting, with bullets whistling around and lightning bullets flashing in the dark skies. All this lasted for about half an hour, and we approached the first line of buildings in the town. When we moved inside the town and started

to move among the buildings, the Lithuanians surrendered. They hoisted a white flag and started to drop their weapons.

We then took about three hundred prisoners and the rest of them escaped in the darkness. About nine or ten of our boys were killed, and about twenty or thirty were wounded. We then collected a lot of machine guns, sub-machine guns, carbines, ammunition and the mortar - the only mortar which the Lithuanians had. It was getting light by then, towards dawn. We executed all of the officers, and told the privates to get undressed. We took their uniforms and boots and sent them all towards Vilnius in their underwear. It was a funny sight - the formerly proud Lithuanian army going back to Vilnius in their underwear, after a complete and utter defeat.

From then on the Lithuanians would not attack us. I do not know what happened to General Plechavicius, he was in Vilnius and had not been with his troops. They had lost at least fifty dead and a great number of wounded. I heard that their commanding officer had committed suicide. It was the end of the Lithuanian army and they did not bother us any more. However, Lithuanian police and their informers were still active. They had a whole network of informers in Vilnius itself, and among the peasants in the country. They were even more corrupt than the Germans, if that was possible, and were taking bribes right, left and centre. Lithuanian police were instrumental in liquidating the Vilnius ghetto, and executing many thousands of Vilnius Jews in a suburb called Ponary.

The day after the raid, the Commandant called me in and gave me the mortar to man, and six privates to help me and a book of instructions. On a few occasions I conducted exercises to learn how to use it. With its base, it was rather heavy and three people were needed to carry it in separate parts, plus the wooden

crates with ammunition. I was still a corporal, but my mortar unit was an independent unit directly under the order of the Commandant.

One day, soon after this, the Commandant called me in and told me to go to a village very close to our then headquarters and to execute a Lithuanian informer who had been condemned to death by a Home Army execution order. He gave me a copy of this typewritten order to hand to the informer. I asked for another two partisans to accompany me, and at dusk we went there on foot because it was very close. We went to the house where the informer, who was a woman, lived. She must have somehow known what was coming, because she opened the door very placidly and said, 'I will do whatever you want me to do. I apologise for all my wrong doing and for informing to the Lithuanian police.' I ordered her out of the house and one of my mates brought out a chair, put the woman on it and bound her hands to the chair with a rope.

I read the death order to her in Polish, then took out my pistol and shot her in the back of the neck, in the best tradition of Russian execution. I had been told that this woman had caused many arrests and executions among the local peasants. I shot her twice to be sure, and she fell to the ground, with the chair on which she was sitting. We waited for about ten minutes, checked her pulse, and closed her eyes. Before leaving, we instructed the head man of the village to bury her somewhere, and to tell everybody in the village that all Lithuanian informers would meet the same end. I was so full of vengeance that it did not bother me at all that she was an unarmed woman. In May 1944 the execution of this woman was justified. It had been a long journey for me; in 1939 I could not make tea, and in 1944 I was carrying out executions.

We knew from the news on the wireless, and from the rumours among the peasants, that the front was coming close and that the Red Army would be attacking Vilnius soon - in a few days or weeks.

Then our government-in-exile in London, the headquarters of the Home Army in London, and the headquarters of the Home Army in Poland, and in the district of Vilnius together conceived the grandiose idea of taking Vilnius from the Germans before the Red Army could do it, and of presenting the Russians with a fait accompli. I do not know who personally conceived this idea, but it resulted in unnecessary bloodshed and the loss of many young lives.

During the first day of July 1944, our Commandant went to see the other Commandants of Home Army units in the district to work out a plan for a joint attack on Vilnius. He came back from this meeting, called in the platoon leaders and gave them an outline of the whole action, with specific orders for each platoon and unit. Platoon leaders passed all this on to us. The idea was that each of the units of the Home Army in the Vilnius district would attack Vilnius at the same time, on 7th July 1944.

Apparently all of these units of the Home Army then numbered about seven or eight thousand people, with carbines and machine guns only. We did not have any heavy guns or tanks. My brigade had our one mortar, which was my baby. We also had a little ammunition, about twenty five to fifty bullets for one carbine and slightly more for machine guns and sub-machine guns. We had only a few hand grenades. I am sure that the Germans had plenty of ammunition, many, many more rounds than we had. The Germans had about seventeen to eighteen thousand infantry, close to three hundred heavy guns, one hundred tanks and about fifty mortars. Their defence of Vilnius basically relied on fortified bunkers in

front of the city outskirts, which were well camouflaged. So this was a David and Goliath struggle. I do not know whether our leaders were aware of all this at the time, or whether our intelligence had failed to get this information. Also, Hitler has apparently given an order to the German troops to fight for Vilnius 'to the last drop of blood' and not to surrender under any circumstances. A Major General Stahel was appointed chief of the defence of Vilnius.

We knew the Germans were stronger than us, but we did not expect that they were so much stronger. All this information I learnt after the War from several memoirs and books written by German and Russian officers - participants in this struggle for Vilnius.

We left our quarters on 6th July 1944, in the afternoon. Some went on foot and some on the few lorries we had. I was on a lorry with my mortar and with my mortar crew. My orders were to keep in the second line close to the Commandant behind the storming first line infantry. We were all in high spirits, singing military songs and looking forward to our greatest partisan adventure.

According to the plan, my brigade was to attack Vilnius from the west, cut the railway line and enter the city through suburbs and parks. Our object was to take over the main post office in the middle of the city. However, there were well-fortified German bunkers we had to cross, and, unbeknown to us, an armoured train stood on the railway line blocking our line of attack. As soon as our infantry came out into the open, close to the railway line, the Germans on the armoured train opened fire. The infantry which was in front of us in a loose formation, returned the German fire. However they were no match for the soldiers on

the armoured train. We already had a great number killed and wounded, and there was no way that our infantry could force the railway line with the armoured train on it. Platoon leaders stopped the attack towards the railway line, and turned the line of attack to the left through a forest.

Then the Germans from the bunkers opened fire, while those on the armoured train continued firing at us - we were under fire from two sides. A few minutes later three or four German planes flew over and dropped a few bombs on us, but fortunately they did not hit anybody. The infantry stopped in front of the bunkers, and started to take up positions in the suburb, and in the forest. The trees gave us good protection against the Germans. The bunkers on the left were a bit higher than our position behind the trees, and the armoured train was on the same level as us. Bullets were whistling everywhere, and mortar shells were exploding among the trees. There was no way that we could complete our operation and enter Vilnius. Already between thirty and fifty boys had been killed and many were wounded. I placed my mortar behind the infantry line and waited for further orders from the Commandant, who had just arrived with his staff. When he saw what was going on he stopped the attack, and ordered me to fire a round from my mortar to shut up the German bunkers. The armoured train was too far away for its fire to bother us. Aiming at the German bunkers, I managed to fire three times, then quickly ordered my crew to change the position of the mortar. We hastily moved the mortar to another position, just as the shells from the German mortars fell exactly on the spot where we had been a few minutes before. I must say that the Germans were experienced soldiers, they knew what they were doing, they were aiming well and their fire was accurate. This was a close shave.

We changed our position again while the Germans kept shelling our infantry and the second line. During this action there were a few wounded but no-one was killed. The Commandant decided to wait before doing anything else and sent a courier to the headquarters for further orders. We were in the middle of a sort of triangle formed by the German bunkers on one side, the train on the other and the planes above us. Our only option was to retreat and forget about the whole idea of taking Vilnius by an attack. My mortar crew members promised me a bottle of vodka for saving their lives. It was noon by then, and getting very hot. We were still waiting for orders. Because we could not hear any gunfire, we assumed that the other brigades had also failed in their attacks.

In the meantime jeeps of the first vanguard units of the Red Army came to our position. The leader of the Russians advised us to wait for the tanks and heavy guns. 'Without these,' he said, 'you will do nothing, and it would be unnecessary bloodshed'. So we waited. At the beginning, the Russians had looked suspiciously at our German uniforms, but when we convinced them that we were Polish partisans they changed their attitude. We gave them cigarettes and some bread because they had nothing with them. They were suntanned and covered with dust. They all had a sub-machine gun and spare disk, and hunting knives behind their belts - they were looking very pugnacious. The stocks of their machine guns were marked with the number of Germans they had killed. When darkness came, the Germans stopped their fire. Meanwhile a courier had come from headquarters. It turned out that all of our Home Army units had failed to enter Vilnius. After encountering strong German resistance, they had been forced to stop the attack. So the order from the headquarters was to cease attacking, be prepared, and wait.

On 14th July, after seven days of heavy fighting, the Red Army, backed up by air force tanks and heavy guns and some of our units, took over Vilnius. My third brigade lost about forty or fifty men. It was a pity that all these high-spirited brave and patriotic young men had lost their lives for nothing. The Russians praised us for our attack and were very friendly. We exchanged cigarettes and food rations and waited together for the arrival of the heavy guns. We heard rumours that, despite Hitler's orders, the Germans had evacuated the remnants of their troops when they realised that further resistance was pointless. Some of them had left Vilnius by plane. In the best of German and Russian traditions, they killed all of the prisoners in the Gestapo prison in Vilnius before leaving.

After the Red Army took over Vilnius our headquarters arranged a new place for the assembly of all the Home Army troops. We had plenty of volunteers from Vilnius wanting to join the Home Army. There were negotiations going on between our high command and the Russian command. The civilian population in the suburbs and in the city itself treated us as heroes. There was a constant flow of vodka and parties and young girls throwing themselves at us. I decided not to disclose my identity for the time being, as I had heard rumours about Jews coming out from hiding and being killed by the fascists among the Polish partisans. I was promoted to platoon leader of a platoon of mortars. So far we still had only one mortar, but we were expecting to get more from the Russians or from London.

This idyll with the Russians lasted until the end of July. Then, one day, the Russian troops surrounded our assembly point and arrested and took away most of our officers. Rumours were rife that they would send us all to Siberia, or that they would incorporate us into the units of the Red Army. I did not like

either of these options so I decided to run away. It was easy to get out at night as there was no barbed wire, and the Russian soldiers who were supposed to be guarding us did not care much whether we stayed or went. Anyway, for a bottle of vodka they were ready to do anything. I took my two mates who had been working with me for the Germans at the Vilnius airport and had joined the Home Army with me.

Firstly we went to a Home Army courier who we knew in Vilnius and he provided us with civilian clothes. We left our pistols with him and decided to go on foot towards Warsaw. We stayed overnight at the courier's place, sleeping on the floor, and left the next day at dawn, heading west. We had managed to escape, but I later heard that our mates who had not escaped were given a choice: to join the Red Army or to be taken to Siberia. Apparently they had said that they wanted to fight the Germans as a unit of the Home Army, but not as members of the Red Army. The Russians, of course, did not agree to this, and they all ended up somewhere in Siberia felling trees. After the death of Stalin they were released, and those who managed to survive went back to Poland. Some of them died in Siberia. I met one of our platoon leaders after the War, and he told me that he had been released from Russia in 1954, one year after the death of Stalin.

As we were walking along the highway towards Warsaw, a few kilometres outside Vilnius, all of a sudden a small detachment of Bielo-Russian militia stopped us. They were all armed, so there was no point in arguing with them. They suspected that we were Germans. We showed them our documents and tried to convince them that we were Poles and not Germans. For some reason they did not shoot us on the spot, but took us to the headquarters of the Russian army unit, which was stationed nearby. The Russian

officer there did not really know what to do with us, so he decided to send us further to the west, to Grodno, and to hand us over to the NKVD - the Russian Gestapo.

We were loaded on a truck with a group of other prisoners who were suspected of being Germans. In a few hours we arrived at our destination and were thrown straight into gaol. The gaol had formerly been used by the Polish administration, and during the German occupation, it had been used by the Gestapo. To keep up the tradition, the NKVD now ruled there. They did not feed us, or give us any water, and they made us sleep on the straw covered floor.

The next day we were called before an officer for interrogation. Somehow we convinced him that we were not Germans, that we were only Poles who had been taken by the Germans to work for them digging trenches and so on, and that now we were heading back home. We did not mention to him, of course, that we were former members of the Home Army. We knew that this Russian officer was of Polish extraction, because he spoke Polish and was rather friendly towards us. He said that he would release us, but first he took away all of our documents. When we protested he said, 'These are fascist documents, you don't need them.' We said: 'That's very nice, but as soon as we leave the gaol we'll be arrested again.' Then he wrote his name, rank and telephone number on a piece of paper, and said that we could show this paper to whoever tried to arrest us to prove that he had released us. He was a major in the NKVD.

We left the gaol, unwashed, hungry and thirsty. In the street outside the gaol we started to talk to the locals, and asked for the address of anybody connected with the Home Army. We were given the address of a young man to whom we went for assistance.

He was a Home Army courier, and promised to help us. First he called a photographer and had our photographs taken. He said that he

would provide us with a new set of false documents. Then he took us to an empty flat which had been occupied by members of his family. There we had a bath and a shave and he provided us with bread and cheese. There was not much more available in the shops. We were grateful for this. We waited two or three days for the new set of false documents, and when we finally got them we decided to set off towards Warsaw again. This Home Army courier gave us a few cigarettes and some money to keep us alive for a few days.

So we were walking towards Warsaw. On the way we bought some food with our money, and when the money ran out we decided to offer to work in the fields for the local peasants. We helped with harvesting - not for money, but only for food. I discovered that manual work in the fields is very, very hard, especially in hot weather - it was August, the height of summer. The peasants wanted value for the bread and soup they were giving us. After a few days we decided to move further westward.

Once again we were slowly moving on foot towards Warsaw. Then we heard rumours about the uprising in Warsaw, which apparently had been a repetition of the uprising in the Vilnius district, except that in Warsaw the Home Army was, at the beginning, successful and that they lost many more dead than we lost in Vilnius. During this incident the duplicity of the Russians became apparent when they stopped their attack outside Warsaw, and waited patiently for the uprising to be crushed by the Germans.

In a small town close to Warsaw we volunteered to join the People's army and produced our false documents. This army had

been formed in Russia and run by the left-wing and Communist Polish politicians who later formed the People's Government. I still could not force myself to disclose my identity. After pretending for so many months not to be a Jew, I could not force myself to admit that I was. This lasted for a few years after the War, and I think it is probably psychologically understandable. Apart from this we were still hearing stories about Jews being killed by right-wing partisans and peasants who would not willingly return their stolen possessions to the Jews coming out of hiding. As well, I thought that, hopefully, I might kill more Germans as a member of the Polish People's Army. I was still lustng for revenge!

The Polish army sent us to an assembly point in a former concentration camp at Majdanek, close to Lublin. I saw the gas chambers for the first time and there were still thousands of shoes belonging to the inmates who had been killed by the Germans. We spent a few days there. They checked our qualifications, and when I told them that I had a driver's licence they sent me to an independent armoured division which was being formed to fight alongside the second Polish People's Army. My two mates were sent to the infantry. I did not see them again.

During the few days we spent in this assembly point we were all half-starving, as they gave us only soup once a day, and some stale black bread. I met up with one of my schoolmates from Lvov with whom I had passed the matriculation in 1941. He had been sent to this assembly point from Lvov when the Russians took over from the Germans. He recognised me instantly, and we had a long chat. He knew that I was Jewish, but he did not tell anybody. He said, 'You'd better keep quiet about it, and also keep quiet about your Home Army activities.' The few days I spent there

were probably the most boring days in my life. We had nothing to do, we were constantly hungry and craving for cigarettes. On top of this, I was worried about my mother, I didn't know whether she was alive or not. The stories we heard about the uprising in Warsaw were very worrying. Apparently the Germans had killed civilians without any scruples or hesitation. My mother, of course, did not know whether or not I was alive.

After a few days of aimless wandering around the former concentration camp, we were put on a train and sent towards the east, to a small village closer to what was to become the new Polish-Russian border. There was nothing prepared for us. We had to organise our quarters ourselves. We were given spades and other implements, and under the direction of the Russian construction unit, we built the in-ground bunkers in which we were to sleep. There were tents for the officers, and some timber structures for kitchen and service rooms. We slept in the bunkers on straw, lying like sardines. To change position at night one had to wake up his immediate neighbours. The smell of dirty socks and constant farting was horrible. There were some heavy smokers among us who used to wake up in the middle of the night to have a smoke. To roll our own cigarettes we were given stinking Russian tobacco, and bits of newspaper. There were latrines for everybody, and a wooden structure for showers and washing basins. Of course, there were always problems with hot water and we got used to cold showers. They fed us black bread and watery soup. They shaved our hair and we all looked like prisoners. Life in this training camp, before we went to the front, was terribly boring and monotonous.

Then our training began. All of our officers were Russian and the language used between us and the Russian officers was some funny mixture of Polish and Russian. We had drill training and

combat training as well as the theory of tanks and motor vehicles, mechanics and driving lessons. As I had my driver's licence and could speak passable Russian, they gave me the job of translating and explaining everything that the Russian technical officers told us about the mechanics of tanks and cars and armoured vehicles. The result was that I ended up knowing all the names of all parts in Russian and in Polish, and some of them even in German because I had been a driver's assistant during my work in Russia for the German air force. I knew the construction of the engine of a motor vehicle backwards and forwards, every detail of it.

The boys from the company were mainly uneducated peasants, a far cry from the members of my Home Army outfit. I was bored stiff. I felt as if I could not endure it. When winter came, thick snow covered everything and the temperatures were again around minus twenty centigrade. Water in the showers in the morning was always close to freezing point.

In January 1945 the Russians broke the German defence lines along the front, across the Vistula River; they liberated Warsaw and other cities, and moved westward towards Berlin. The rumour was that we would be sent to the front line some time in March. I wrote a letter to my old wet nurse in Tomaszow, and asked her about my mother. At last I got a message from her through the army post that my mother was alive and well. She also told me about other members of my mother's family who had survived. They had all been liberated from the Germans, who were retreating everywhere.

Our company received four American Studebaker trucks as prime movers for anti-tank guns. I was appointed as driver of one of them. I had to pass another driving exam, so I got my military driver's licence.

In February 1945 they sent me and the three other drivers to Luck, to accompany a convoy a Russian trucks given by the Russians to the Polish Army. In Luck I made enquiries about Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, but was told that there were none. Apparently, a few days after the Germans had taken over the city, in 1941, they had dragged all of the Jews out of their houses and flats, put them on trucks, and driven them out of the city. They had been executed in a forest and buried there. Apparently, there were no survivors.

Now, in 1945, the city seemed like a Russian city, with Russian traffic militiamen, red flags everywhere and people in the street speaking Russian. There were very few Polish inhabitants, and those who remained intended to go west, to Poland. So that was the end of my dreams about Ada, my first love, and another reason for hating the Germans. I could imagine her and her parents going to the slaughter like lambs, without anticipating what was going to happen to them. My only consolation was that I had so far survived, and that I had shot two Germans that I knew of, and probably also others, during my stay with the Home Army partisans.

In our four Studebakers we went back to our base with the convoy of Russian trucks driven by Russian drivers. There were rumours about Ukrainian partisans ambushing Russians in this area, but nothing happened to us. There were fascist Ukrainian bandits still dreaming about an independent Ukraine, who were fighting the Red Army.

When we came back to our base I had letters from my mother and other members of my mother's family.

We were given Polish uniforms and caps bearing the Polish eagle but without the crown - in the eyes of the Bolsheviks the Polish eagle with the crown was a symbol of pre-War Poland, of the bourgeoisie, landed gentry and rotten capitalists. Of course, we were given indoctrinating propaganda lectures by political officers. I knew it all, more or less, from my high school days in Luck and Lvov. But the lecturers did not care about me, they wanted to win the hearts of the young peasants.

In the meantime the secret police were arresting rich peasants, members of the pre-War Polish administration, former officers of the Polish army and all so-called 'enemies of the people'. I did not advertise my stay with the Home Army and I did not advertise my true identity. Once again I found it hard to get rid of my false identity. I got used to it, and I was scared to openly speak the truth.

The worst part of the uniform for the Polish army was the puttees which we had to put on our legs - they kept coming undone and falling off. In the Home Army I had a nice pair of half boots which I had taken from a dead German. They were very comfortable, had no laces and you could jump into them from a high bunk. They were waterproof. Now I had shoes that had to be laced, and these horrible puttees.

Our company was to be a service company for the tanks. We had four anti-tank guns and the four Studebakers to pull them, a number of sappers for building bridges and pontoons and for making the mine fields safe. The rest of the company were infantry trained to ride on the tanks, and in the case of a fight with Germans, to follow on foot. This was a risky activity and was glad that I could be with my anti-tank gun and hopefully not within the range of German fire.

I exchanged a few letters with my mother. Military post was very slow. Again, I was promoted to the rank of corporal - I was a corporal in the Home Army and now I was a corporal again. I never advanced beyond the rank of corporal, and frankly, I did not want to advance. I wanted to leave the army as soon as the War was over. At one stage they offered to send me to a military academy to become an officer, but I refused. A military career was not for me. I liked my independence, and I have never liked too much discipline. I do not like to be guided all the time by my superiors.

Finally, in April 1945, we were told that we were going to fight. Our tanks, motor vehicles and guns were loaded onto a train which we also boarded, and we travelled towards Germany but my armoured corps was supposed to fight the Germans independently alongside the Second Polish Army. First we went to the River Neisse, in Saxony. The River Neisse was forced by the Red Army, and when we came to the main crossing of the river there were already bridges and pontoon bridges waiting for us. We disembarked from the train, everything was unloaded and we started to move towards the bridges to cross the river. There was a huge number of tanks together on the riverbank. Airplanes were flying above us but there were no Germans in sight. When I looked at this great mass of men and military hardware I felt that I was watching history in the making. After we crossed the river, our tanks started to move towards Dresden, and my anti-tank battery followed.

We moved on towards the west without any resistance and without seeing any Germans. Our tanks, with us behind them, moved so fast that we lost contact with the main forces of our corps. We also lost contact with our field kitchen. We had to fend for ourselves by invading German farmhouses which were usually deserted, and taking any food that we could find.

Once, on our way west, we found a cheese factory and for a couple of days we ate only cheese. I was sick and tired of yellow cheese. In one completely deserted German village, our boys found a vat full of raw alcohol, which was probably to be used for the manufacture of schnapps, the German equivalent of vodka. Of course some of the boys got completely drunk. One nearly drowned in the vat. The men would not leave the vat so finally one of our officers fired a few pistol shots through the walls of the vat and the alcohol started to pour out. That was the end of it.

After a short rest to sober up we moved west; the tanks in front, and, two or three kilometres behind the tanks, our four guns pulled by the Studebakers with the shells and the crew of the guns sitting behind the driver's cabin. I was travelling with the Russian lieutenant, the commander of the anti-tank battery. We stopped at night and we slept on the ground beneath the car, under blankets. It was April and it was still very cold.

Finally, not far from Dresden, we made our first contact with the Germans. A few German tanks started firing at our tanks. Our tanks returned the fire, but the Germans managed to stop us. We stopped behind the tanks, put the guns in the firing position and the gun crews started to fire against the German tanks. We, the drivers, parked our cars behind trees in the nearby forest to protect them against German fire. The fighting went on for some time until finally the Germans started to retreat. Our tanks went forward and the infantry behind them. There were a few German tanks and a few of our tanks which had been hit by shells, and were slowly burning with the crew trapped inside. Quite a number of our infantry were killed. We attached the guns again to our Studebakers, and moved westward.

Our tanks continued to chase the German tanks for a few hours. Then, all of a sudden, a great number of German tanks appeared on our left hand side and attacked our tanks. After a short exchange of fire our tanks started to retreat, leaving us in the front line. We already had our guns in position, and were firing them, against the German tanks. Once again we managed to put the Studebakers in a safe place behind trees. The German tanks were advancing on us, and they were quite close. But then Russian planes arrived and started to bomb the German tanks. The Germans retreated, our tanks came back and started to chase the German tanks. We connected the guns to our Studebakers and followed our tanks. We still had no contact with our main forces, and with the kitchen.

This went on for a few days. The Germans had no air force then - Russian planes were ruling the sky without any opposition. The Germans were outnumbered and out-gunned. I think they did not have much ammunition but they fought bravely and they would not surrender. The uniforms of the dead Germans were the uniforms of the SS shock troops. They would not surrender because they knew that they would be killed if they did. There would not be anybody willing to surrender from our side either. We knew that if the Germans caught one of ours they would torture him before execution. I remember that this had been the same in the Home Army - we were told never to surrender to the Germans because they would skin you alive and torture you before killing you.

It was the beginning of May 1945. We were coming quite close to Dresden when we met the Red Army outfit. Our main forces then caught up with us. We had lost a few tanks and a few men but the Germans had lost more. Under new orders we abandoned the road towards Dresden and moved towards the Sudeten Mouutaius to chase the last remnants of the German army which were trying to force their way from Hungary and Czechoslovakia towards Germany. These

were the last days of the War. We heard communication wires, about the advance of the Americans and English and French on the western front, and about the impending victory. The euphoria of victory was really exhilarating. An end to the horrors of German occupation had come at last.

We rode in a column towards the Sudeten Mountains. The vanguard motorbike was in front, and behind I in my Studebaker with my Russian lieutenant beside me. We came towards a bridge crossing over the road. The motorbike went under it and moved forward. When my Studebaker was right under the bridge, I suddenly heard a loud explosion. The Studebaker left the road and landed partly in the ditch on the left hand side of the road. We had hit a mine. There was general commotion and smoke everywhere. The Russian lieutenant lost his head and did not know what to do, and the crew of the gun started to jump down from the truck. We waited for the explosion of the shells but this did not happen. The cars behind my Studebaker stopped, and I started to shout, 'Everybody into the ditch - this could be an ambush - there could be Germans around.' We waited in the ditch, with carbines and machine guns ready, but, luckily, there were no Germans around. My car had its middle axle broken, and was undriveable. My lieutenant went back to talk to the Chief-of-Staff who was riding behind in a motorbike to decide what to do. This was the 9th May 1945.

In the meantime a jeep arrived with a driver and a Russian officer inside. They were both slightly drunk. The Russian officer started to shout, 'Hitler kaput. The Germans surrendered. That's the end of the War.' We all went berserk. At last it was finished and we had beaten the Germans. It turned out that the boys had some vodka hidden, and we started to

celebrate the victory. I was really happy, I had achieved my main two objectives - I had survived, and I had taken part in beating the Germans.

The Russian officer who came with the news of the end of the War had another slug of vodka and ordered his driver to drive on. 'You had better be careful, there could be another mine under this bridge,' I told him. 'Normally they set two mines - one to hit the left-hand side and one to hit the right-hand wheels of the car. In the case of my car there was only one mine under the left-hand side wheels which exploded.' The Russian said, 'Never mind', started to swear, and ordered his driver to move. The driver started the engine and the jeep moved towards the bridge. As soon as they went under the bridge the second mine on the right-hand side exploded and that was the end of the Russian officer, his driver and the jeep. It was the most idiotic death imaginable. It was as stupid as the death of my friend in the Home Army who had shot himself by playing Russian roulette.

In the meantime my lieutenant came back and said, 'We've decided to leave you here with the broken-down Studebaker. We will leave you two infantrymen and one light machine gun, ammunition and tinned food, and in a couple of days we'll send another car to pull your car and then you can re-join the outfit.' He also told me that he would nominate me for a silver medal for bravery. In fact I did get this silver medal for bravery later on and I still have it.

Another Studebaker pulled my undriveable car back to the nearest village where we set up a tent and went to some German farmhouses looking for food. There were no men, and only a few women who were scared to death because they knew that the soldiers were

raping German women, especially the Russian soldiers. When they found out that we were not Russians but Poles they were not so scared. All of their men had either been drafted into the German Army, arrested for something or other and sent to concentration camps, or taken to dig trenches for the German army.

It was the beginning of May, the days and nights were becoming warmer. Spring was in the air; everywhere there was the fragrance of flowers, nightingales sang in the bushes and I really felt great. We had a bottle of vodka, a few packets of cigarettes, and some tins of food. We told the Germans to cook a dinner for us. After the dinner, which two German women brought to our tent, we decided to go to sleep in shifts so that one was always on the lookout and two asleep.

I must confess that we could not sleep much because of the German girls - they kept coming to our tent and throwing themselves at us. You can imagine what happened with sex-starved girls and us also sex-starved, young and healthy. This went on for a few days and nights. The German girls obviously did not remember that we were sub-human slaves, and that they were the members of the master race. All the Germans wore white armbands as a sign of surrender. They were servile and bore no resemblance to the sadistic monsters who had killed unarmed women and children.

After a few days another Studebaker came from our unit with a driver and his assistant and we connected my broken Studebaker by a chain to it. In this way we rejoined our outfit, went to Sudeten and then back to Poland.

In September 1945 I left the army for university studies.